Ill-Gotten Gains

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Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply, Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Gen, M/M

Fandom:
僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationship:
Midoriya Izuku & Shigaraki Tomura | Shimura Tenko, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Midoriya Izuku, Midoriya Izuku & Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead/Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Midoriya Izuku & Shinsou Hitoshi, Midoriya Izuku/Shinsou Hitoshi, (eventually)

Character:
Midoriya Izuku, Shigaraki Tomura | Shimura Tenko, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Bakugou Katsuki, Kurogiri (My Hero Academia), Shinsou Hitoshi, Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Sensei | All For One

Additional Tags:
Sensei | All For One is Midoriya Hisashi, Midoriya Izuku Has a Quirk, Midoriya Izuku Has All for One Quirk, Midoriya Izuku & Shigaraki Tomura | Shimura Tenko Are Siblings, (of a sort), Parental Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Parental Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Minor Character Death, Additional Warnings In Author's Note, Angst with a Happy Ending, Hurt/Comfort, Canon-Typical Violence, POV Multiple, Family Feels, Self-Worth Issues, Mental Health Issues, Healing, Slow Build

Language:
English

Collections:

Dad Vibes, Jaydofavs, Days' best bnha finds ☄, Still_to_read, hey_look_at_all_these_hidden_gems, The Good Fics, My morning bnha tea, Rain Recs, Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, honestly some of the best fics ive ever read, Maximilian's Hero Academia, Bnha fics I don't want to loose, soul healing comes from fanfiction, Best of MHA ever!, DerangedDeceiver's Favorite Fics, an aroace's favourite fics!, Like A Favorite Sweater, Most favorite works (GoSleep_NoThatSoInteresting), BEST BOI IZUKU_top BNHA works, None For Yall, Мои_любимые_работы, BNHA Rereadables, Keep up with these gems, MHA FICS, Blues Favourite Bnha Fics, thewanderingcat's favorite My Hero Academia fics, Dadzawa protects the Green Bean!, love and big apprish to the writers and betas of these pieces, why I only sleep an hour a night, STO My Hero Academia - not completed works, Deku Has A Brain, Myra_Approved_Version_of_Midoriya_Izuku, Quality Fics, Chris's Best Izuku Fics, Ashes' Library, Dadzawa Vibes, From the Vault, Lex's Favorite BNHA Fics ٩(●˙▿˙●)۶, Todo lo que puedo llegar a OLVIDAR, .☄Thoth's Luxury Library☄., Creative Chaos Discord Recs, Bug's Fav MHA Fics, Izuku Angst (aka Give Izuku a Hug Challenge), Izuku's Dads, What do you mean by Dad for One is not real? Just watch, The best fics, Fanfics that Would be Best-Sellers if They Were Published Books, The Overly Toasted Bagel Collection, Personal_Preferences, quetegustandebnh, bnha fics i dream about 🌙, Izuku is just trying his best your honor, WHY ARE THESE FICS SO GOOOOODDDD, FreakingAmazingFics, Wan Shi Tong's Library, Where Green Beans Grow, Silvernight01's Library, Great Fics i Want To Re Read, Goku's MHA List, These fics made me scream, I'm manly enough to admit I cried reading these, the perfect fic doesn't exi-, Eatbook's Cherished and wanting more All Fandoms, craftyreader_favs, Some Good Food, dadzawa and his hellions, Behold the Sacred Texts, I need a good parental figure [read: Dadzawa] in my life, To_keep_up_with_W, Izuku Fics Bc He's Better Than You, Good and Intriguing AUs, just some incredible bnha ff, T.S.S (This shit slaps), My Favourite Bnha stories to read, Best, I'll come back, Best of BNHA, McNanas' Recommends, ♕, The Reasons For My Insomnia, Dadzawa and other, BNHA/MHA, I wanna read these but am currently in a depressive episode, Fics that somehow keep me alive, mha vault, Villain Deku, to read soon i guess, SMALL COLLECTION OF ABSOLUTE PERFECTION | BNHA, hello yes i can't stop thinking about these works, ForRiamostly, The Forest, Got 99 problems but these ain't one, Seul's Favorite BNHA Fics, Bnha fanfic who has my heart, Gryffs fics II, Lee_ec Fave Unfinished, passes MY vibe check!, BNHAHappyFunFics

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by ghostmaybite

Summary

When his father and Tomura start planning the USJ attack, Izuku makes a plan of his own. It's simple, only four steps:

1. Steal Eraserhead's quirk
2. Use it to kill All for One
3. Give Erasure back, hopefully
4. Go to jail, probably

He's prepared for the plan to fail at any time, but surprisingly, it's not until step 4 that things fall through.

Attraction of Small Objects

Chapter Notes

Some content warnings in end notes, just in case.

Alright, so this story has grown beyond my wildest imaginings, both in length and audience, so I wanted to make a better introductory note to give people some relevant information, if you're curious

1) To be on the safe side, IGG is rated M for language, violence, and some dark themes
2) IGG contains death and violence. I do not consider the death major or the violence graphic, but there is a degree of subjectivity to those terms, hence the use of both "no archive warnings apply" and "creator chose not to use archive warnings."
3) The angst in this story is heavy at times, or so I have been told. That said, the narrative as a whole is meant to be about healing, ultimately a source of hope. Keep in mind, though, that healing itself can be an incredibly painful and slow process. The "hurt/comfort" and "healing" tags are pretty closely linked to that "slow build" tag. Take care of yourself if you're sensitive to depictions of mental health issues!
4) Updates are currently slow and irregular. IGG is no longer my primary focus - I'm spending most of my time and energy working on my health and an original novel. With that said, no matter how far apart updates may be, IGG *is not* discontinued. If it ever is, you'll know. I'll publish all my notes, snippets, and plans - and trust me, there's a lot of them. IGG comes with *guaranteed* closure, if not proper completion.

Okay, that should be it. Hopefully I haven't scared anyone away or anything lmao. I just have a compulsive need to tell people What's Going On and the note I wrote 100k+ ago just wasn't cutting it for me anymore
(updated 4/28/23)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months from his fifth birthday, Izuku Midoriya stands on his bed and practices using a quirk he doesn't yet have. He's a late bloomer - that's what his mom and all his teachers started saying

when his classmates got their quirks and he didn't - but he can't let that hold him back if he wants to be a hero. Kacchan got his quirk *ages* ago and has already gotten so good at controlling his explosions, so Izuku makes a point of practicing every day after school to avoid falling too far behind.

He takes a deep breath through his nose, filling his whole chest with air, then exhales a harsh gust from his mouth. The hope is that something will ignite on the way up, sparking breath into flame, just like his dad. Kacchan always says that fire quirks are really strong and if Izuku inherits his father's quirk they can be like All Might and Endeavour. Izuku tries five times, but then he starts to get dizzy and has to stop, wobbling on his bedspread before collapsing down, staring up at the ceiling. No fire breathing today, then.

After a moment of breathing normally, Izuku reorients himself and focuses on his next task. He springs up, sitting cross legged by his pillows, and stares at the items on his desk. An All Might action figure catches his attention and he narrows in on it, stretching out a hand and straining his concentration as hard as he can, squinting his eyes and pursing his lips. He visualizes reaching out and snagging it, attracting it back to him the way he's seen his mother do so many times. For a long moment, he stays that way and he thinks he feels a flash of something, like maybe it worked this time.

Hope rises in him, fierce and enthusiastic, and he can't suppress a grin as he mentally *tugs* again on the figurine. It doesn't so much as budge. Izuku's smile falls, cheeks stinging in its absence. At this point, he should know better than to expect anything, but he still gets ahead of himself sometimes. With a sigh, he drops his hand back into his lap.

He takes a deep, fortifying breath to chase away the ache of dashed hopes. "One more time," he says to himself, nodding resolutely. He reaches up, focuses, *pulls* . Across the room, the toy wobbles and moves forward an inch, dropping off the desk and rolling across the floor. Izuku stares.

"Did I do that?" he asks quietly, jaw slack, and the little plastic All Might grins up at him, arm posed in a perpetual thumbs up that seems to say *yes, yes you did* .

Izuku scrambles up onto his knees and reaches forwards again with a new determination, pulling the figurine towards him. He watches every slow inch of its progress across the room with unbridled awe, gently pulling it from the air when it's close enough. He's tired now,

but that's far eclipsed by the *joy* filling every bit of his body. He's so happy he can't contain it all, eyes brimming up with tears that roll in thick trails down his cheeks. He brushes them away as they blur his vision, wanting to keep his eyes on the signature yellow, red, and blue that prove what he had just done.

Izuku had a quirk. Finally, after waiting for so long, he had a quirk. Now he and Kacchan could be heroes together, and his classmates would stop teasing him, and his mom wouldn't have to start looking for doctors like she had mentioned last week. He had a quirk! He had a -

Izuku rushes out of bed, tripping over his feet, shaking from a cocktail of adrenaline, relief, surprise, and fatigue. He clutches his action figure tight in one hand and throws himself out of his room.

"Momma!" he cries, loud and watery with emotion as he makes his way towards the kitchen where his mother is making dinner.

"Izuku?" she calls in return. Something clatters in the kitchen and not a second later, she appears around the corner, meeting Izuku halfway. Immediately, she is down on her knees in front of him. "Baby, what happened?" she asks, hands running over his arms, wide eyes looking him over. "Why are you crying?"

Izuku's mouth opens, sniffling and hiccuping as he grasps for what to say. Wordlessly, he thrusts the All Might figurine forwards. He had been gripping it so hard that the plastic left little red indents in his palm. His mother takes it, turning it over between gentle hands.

"Is it broken?" she asks, inspecting it for some kind of flaw. "Sweetie, I'm sure we can fix it." Izuku's curls bounce as he shakes his head, lifting his hand to telepathically tug the object back to him. His mother's fingers go limp as it leaves her grasp. She gasps softly. Izuku swaps from vigorously shaking his head to nodding it with just as much vehemence.

Izuku's mother is quick to join him in tears, pulling him into a tight hug and crying about how proud she is. By the time she lets him go her shirt and the top of his hair are both soaked through and dinner has burned.

Izuku is put to bed early that night. Despite his excitement urging him to stay awake, experimenting with his new quirk has left him thoroughly exhausted and drifting off on the couch the moment he finishes his dinner. Inko scoops him up into her arms and thin arms wrap weakly around her neck as he buries his face there. One of the plastic spikes of All Might's signature hairstyle stabs into the back of her head from where Izuku has the toy held tightly in his fist. He has barely put it down all night, and when he did, he was always quick to use his quirk to tug it back to him,

"I don't wanna go to bed," Izuku mumbles blearily into her shoulder, "I'm not tired." Inko only hums in response. She bumps the door to his room open with her hip and gently deposits him in the bed. He's asleep by the time she gets the blankets settled around him.

Every day, Inko thinks she couldn't possibly love her son any more, and then every day he proves her wrong again. Today, seeing Izuku so happy and excited to have inherited her quirk, Inko feels a spark of appreciation that she hasn't in a long time. "Attraction of small objects" has felt simple and mundane for so long, but Izuku brings a light to it, just like he does everything else.

After such an emotional evening, Inko is feeling quite drained, but she settles on the couch to watch some TV before heading off to bed herself. The remote is on the side table, only a lean away, but with a revived sense of wonder, she reaches out with her quirk to pull it to her, just because she can.

It doesn't move an inch.

Inko frowns for a second before shaking her head and smiling wryly at the irony. As marvelous as Izuku makes her quirk seem, it really is a limited, fickle thing. It has never been strong or reliable. At the end of such a long day, tired as she is, even such a small thing must be outside what she can manage. Maybe she was coming down with a cold - her quirk never did cooperate when she was sick.

Now that she thought of it, she had been feeling a little bit off for most of the night.

"Mama, how long 'til Kacchan gets here?" Izuku asks over breakfast.

He's been vibrating with anticipation from the moment his eyes opened in the morning and it took a great deal of restraint for him to hold the question back so long.

His mom smiles fondly at him. "He'll be here in the afternoon, sweetie."

"How many hours?"

"Around four."

Izuku frowns at his rice. "That's so many," he whispers under his breath.

Already, he has his All Might toy clenched in his fist. He needs to keep it with him so he's ready to show Kacchan his quirk when the other boy gets there. Four hours seems like ages to wait, even though Kacchan is supposed to be coming over at the same time he does almost every Saturday. Impatience squirms in Izuku's stomach and he eats quickly, as if finishing his breakfast will make the afternoon come faster.

Finishing her own food, his mother picks up their dishes. "Come on, why don't you use some of that spare energy to help me clean up."

Carefully depositing All Might on the table, Izuku pulls a stepstool over to the sink and climbs up so he can be level with the counter. His mother toes him slightly to the side so he's out of her way then starts the water running and hands Izuku a cloth. They wait for a moment while the water warms and Izuku reaches out for the stream with his quirk, curious as to what will happen. Water like this isn't exactly a "small object," but Izuku is delighted when it curves slightly in the air, diverting towards him before continuing its path to the drain.

He gasps, "Mama, Mama, look! The water, Mama, that's me!"

His mother makes appropriately awed noises. "Very good, Izu! I didn't know my quirk could do that. How clever!" He beams at the praise.

Izuku tests his quirk on everything - the chopsticks, little grains of leftover rice, soap suds. He figures out he can pull on the faucet handle to turn the water off but can't turn it back on the same way. His mom laughs indulgently at all his antics and lets Izuku attract all the dishes to himself to dry when she's done watching.

With only the two of them, dishes are usually a quick and simple task,

but it takes more than twice as long this morning. When they're done, Izuku is glad to hear that now there's only three hours left until Kacchan should arrive. He and his mother settle in the living room, turning the TV on to the news. Despite his restless mood, Izuku is immediately absorbed by the reports on villain attacks and heroes, pointing to the screen and shouting exclamations whenever anything particularly impressive happens.

Izuku could easily spend the entire day watching heroes on TV and the three hours that seemed like they would take an eternity to pass fly by in the blink of an eye. In the middle of an impassioned ramble to his mother, who is less a contributor than a witness, several bangs interrupt the combined drone of Izuku's voice and the TV. It's the telltale sound of Kacchan's arrival - he always announces himself by kicking instead of knocking and there are a handful of small scuffs along the bottom of the Midoriyas' door from his shoes.

"Kacchan is here!" Izuku shouts, interrupting himself mid-sentence. He's gone before his mother can even begin to stand, taking off towards the entrance and throwing the door open. "Kacchan! Why are you so late? I've been waiting forever!"

The blond on the other side of the door scowls, raising his voice to match Izuku's, "Shut up, I'm not late!"

Izuku's mother comes up behind them. "Izuku," she sighs, "you know you're not supposed to open the door on your own."

Izuku rubs the back of his head sheepishly, closing the door as Kacchan shoves past him and into the apartment. "Sorry, Mama. It's just Kacchan and I was so excited!"

She ruffles his hair. "I know, sweetie. Why don't you take Katsuki-kun to your room and show him what you've learned?"

Grinning, once again vibrating with uncontrolled excitement, Izuku nods and grabs Kacchan by the wrist to drag him across the living room. Kacchan tugs his arm away, barking a chastisement at Izuku for touching him, and follows along at a more sedate pace. The distance to Izuku's room is small, but in his haste, Izuku can't help but glance back repeatedly to ensure that Kacchan is still following him.

"What's this all about, nerd?" Kacchan demands as he throws himself down on Izuku's bed. "You're being even more annoying than usual."

Izuku ignores the insult, knowing Kacchan better than to get offended

at anything that comes from his mouth, and thrusts forward his All Might action figure, which had been by Izuku's side all day, dutifully waiting for this moment. Kacchan's eyes cross slightly to focus on the toy suddenly invading his space and a small, aborted explosion crackles across his palm on reflex.

"I got my quirk!"

Batting Izuku's hand and the toy to the side, Kacchan crows, "About time!" He leans forward with a grin to match Izuku's, though his is far sharper and more aggressive, if equally excited. "So what is it then? Can you finally breathe fire like your old man?"

"I got my mom's quirk! It's teli - tela - telekinesis! I can pull things towards me! I've only had it for a day, so I don't know what the limits are, like how heavy the objects can be, or how far away. I have some idea from what my mom knows about her quirk, but mine might be different, and she never really did anything to train her's, anway, so I'm sure that I can make mine stronger with time. I'll have to practice lots, but I think it'll be super good for rescue or even combat if I use it right -" In his growing excitement, Izuku's words become faster and faster until they're no longer distinct. His attention is only drawn back to the present moment when Kacchan lets out a drawn out groan.

"Shut up, already! I don't care about any of that!" Kacchan scowls, though this is the distinct type of scowl that Izuku knows means he's pouting. "Auntie's quirk isn't very strong. You better keep up! I'm not gonna have my partner dragging me down with some lame quirk!"

"I won't!" Izuku promises, enthusiasm undented by Kacchan's words. "I'll work super hard to become the number one hero with you, Kacchan!"

Kacchan scoffs. "You'll become the *number two* hero, nerd. *I'll* be the number one! So are you gonna show me your dumb quirk, or what?"

"Ah! Right!" Izuku fumbles with his toy for a moment before tossing it to Kacchan, who catches it much more gracefully.

Taking a deep breath to prepare himself, Izuku reaches out his hand, maybe a touch more dramatically than necessary, and *tugs* , just like he has been all day. Nothing happens. Izuku blinks and flushes a violent red. Kacchan doesn't look as angry as Izuku would have expected him to at the failure, frowning softly at the toy still in his hands instead of glowering or shouting.

“Sorry!” Izuku squawks. “Let me try again!”

Embarrassment and frustration burn in Izuku’s stomach. All he wants is to impress Kacchan, which is already a very hard thing to manage, and he goes and messes it up. He’s been using his quirk all day with no difficulty, but maybe that was the problem? Maybe he already tired himself out, though he didn’t *feel* that tired until just a second ago.

He steels himself to do better this time, musters up all his determination, and reaches out again. He flexes his fingers a little, like a stretch or a warm up, and then. And then his palms crackle and spark, his skin tingling and warm, like a bunch of pop rocks going off in his hands. There’s a familiar sweet smell in the air, like caramel, that Izuku has associated with Kacchan ever since the boy’s quirk came in.

Why was Kacchan using his quirk?

But Kacchan *isn't* using his quirk. He’s still holding Izuku’s All Might figurine, and Kacchan would *never* explode All Might. Kacchan’s eyes are wide, his mouth slightly slack, expression empty, and as Izuku watches, his fingers go limp and the toy falls, bouncing on the bedspread before tumbling to the ground. He looks like he’s seen a ghost and Izuku feels distinctly like he’s missed something as he stares at his own hands and tries to catch up.

Palm facing up, Izuku flexes his fingers again. The same feeling dances across his skin and this time he sees small sparks and a wisp of smoke that he recognizes from when Kacchan’s quirk manifested almost a year ago.

“What did you do?”

Still not understanding what’s happening, Izuku looks back up to Kacchan, whose face has lost its unnatural blankness.

“What did you do?!”

Kacchan grabs Izuku’s hand in a too-tight grip. It takes a moment for Izuku to name the look on his face, because he’s never seen Kacchan look this way before, but after a tense moment that stretches out like taffy, Izuku calls it *fear*.

“I don’t know,” Izuku answers honestly. He feels dizzy and sick and tired. The smell of burnt sugar coats the back of his throat.

“You stole it.”

“I didn’t.”

“It’s *mine* and you *stole it* .”

“I *didn’t* .”

Izuku’s words are weak and Kacchan ignores them anyway, gripping Izuku’s hand tighter, until the bones grind together and Izuku can’t help but reach up with his free hand to try to claw himself free. Red welts rise in the wake of Izuku’s dull nails, but Kacchan doesn’t even seem to notice, grip still painful and unwavering.

“Give it back.” Kacchan’s voice is low and steady and it sends a shiver up Izuku’s spine.

“I don’t - I can’t - I don’t know what’s going on.”

The moment seems suspended in amber, warped and endless, but then the tension breaks in a flurry of movement. In a single motion, Kacchan springs up from the bed and tosses Izuku to the ground. Izuku catches himself, crying out when his weight lands on his tormented hand. Tears build in his eyes as he attempts to scramble backwards, but the floor feels slippery and his limbs feel like they’re made of jelly. Kacchan is on top of him in an instant, and for the first time, Izuku is scared of the other boy.

For so long, Kacchan’s temper has been harmless, even humorous, a simple aspect of his personality that Izuku accepts and even adores, because he adores everything about Kacchan, even the rough edges. Now, as he snags Izuku’s shirt collar in his fist, Kacchan feels dangerous. Kacchan is always so amazing and brave and strong, and for the first time, that makes Izuku feel *weak* .

Izuku’s head bounces once on the floor boards as Kacchan straddles him, leaving Izuku dizzy and disoriented. Lifting his arms is like moving through tar, but Izuku manages to bring one hand up and brace it against Kacchan’s face, trying to shove him back, though there’s no competition between the boys in terms of strength. Unconsciously, Izuku’s palm crackles, a small explosion popping against the left side of Kacchan’s face, making him pull back with a hiss.

“You little thief. Give it back, you no good *villain* , give it back, *give it back!”*

Kacchan is yelling and Izuku is sobbing and furniture bangs as limbs and bodies collide and then everything blurs together like watercolor, colors running into each other until everything is black and noises merging into a single high pitched tone.

Inko makes nothing of the first noise - a shout. Young boys can get loud, especially Katsuki, who screams every other sentence at max volume. Today, she's prepared for them to be louder than usual; she can hardly blame them, given the nature of Izuku's exciting news. Both boys have been waiting for months for Izuku's quirk to come in, eagerly playing heroes in the meantime.

The second noise - a bang - has Inko stopping her business in the living room to listen more attentively. Bangs and bumps are also common occurrences with young children and are often nothing to worry about, but can also be the tell tale sign that something is broken or someone is injured. Not necessarily a reason to go running, but certainly cause to sit up and pay attention.

There is no discrete third noise. Barely a pause after the bang, there is cacophony, and Inko wishes she had been more cautious and gone running sooner. There is screaming and crying and something has obviously gone terribly wrong. Wasting no more time, Inko rushes to her son's room, hoping that no one is too badly hurt.

She expected, at worst, a nasty fall. Maybe some kind of cut or gash. Certainly not to find Katsuki screaming on top of her son, the both of them crying, though Izuku far more desperately.

Katsuki had one hand balled tight in the collar of Izuku's t-shirt and the other drawn back as if to deliver a blow. When Inko enters the room, his face pales and his grip goes slack, the sudden release of tension causing Izuku to fall backwards to the ground. Katsuki's yelling cuts off, making the dull thud of Izuku's skull hitting the ground seem that much louder. And then there is only the sound of Izuku's sobs as he tries to curl in on himself, prevented by Katsuki's weight on his stomach.

Inko has never been a violent person and she reminds herself of that now. She would never hurt a child, much less Katsuki, who she held hours after birth and sees almost as a second son, but with Izuku, her

baby , crying on the floor, she has to swallow down a protective rage the likes of which she's never felt before.

In three steps, she crosses the distance between the door and the boys, grabbing Katsuki by the still-raised arm, carefully double-checking to make sure her grip isn't too tight as she drags him away. She leaves him in the far corner of the room before returning to Izuku and kneeling by his side.

His sobs have calmed, though he is still crying slightly, his eyes open but glassy and unfocused. Inko calls his name, but he doesn't respond beyond curling towards her. One of his hands is discolored and Inko feels at it gently to make sure nothing is broken, thankful for small mercies when it seems to just be badly bruised. There's a small lump on the back of his head and blood smeared over his chin from a bitten tongue, but he doesn't otherwise seem injured. At least physically, Inko, as a nurse, should be perfectly able to care for him. He calms as she pets his hair and while he's conscious and clearly recognizes that she's there, at least on some level, Inko's concern grows with every second he is silent.

Only when she is sure Izuku is safe, does Inko seek out the other child in the room. Katsuki is sitting in the corner where she left him. He is pressed as tightly to both walls as he can be, glaring sullenly over his knees, which he has pulled up to his chest. It is likely the most vulnerable Inko has ever seen him look, and he shoots constant glances between her and Izuku, seemingly caught between a fear of consequences and the anger that led him to attack Izuku to begin with.

"Katsuki," she barks, voice trembling only slightly, sounding more like something that would come out of Mitsuki's mouth than her own. Katsuki visibly stiffens in response. "What happened?"

He is quiet for so long, only glaring, that Inko begins to think he isn't going to respond, until - "He's a thief."

"Explain."

"He stole it."

"Stole *what* , Katsuki?" Inko's tone is sharper than she intended, but she's quickly losing patience. She wants to give Katsuki the benefit of the doubt and believe that he is a child and children make mistakes, sometimes very bad ones, but she is not going to play guessing games with her son's well-being.

“My quirk. He was supposed to show me his, but instead he took mine and now he can use it and I can’t.”

Like the earth has fallen away, Inko’s stomach plummets and her head swims. It’s preposterous, ridiculous, *impossible* . Quirks can’t be *stolen* - that would be like stealing someone’s eye color, or their height. But Inko thinks of her own quirk, which she hadn’t been able to use since the night before, and she thinks of the odd, *off* feeling she’s had since then, and then, even though it’s impossible, she thinks *dear God, he’s right* .

Izuku’s head turns in her lap, and she looks down to see him staring across the room at Katsuki, eyes still dull, but focused now.

“Izu, baby, are you okay?” she asks, voice soft. Tears build in her eyes as he turns back to her, blinking for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” he finally says, words slightly slurred by the swelling of his tongue. Inko can’t help the hurt noise she makes in response, smoothing his hair back as a few tears drip from her eyes. She presses a kiss to his forehead.

“You have nothing to apologize for, sweetie,” she assures him, hoping he believes her. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“He’s a thief,” Katsuki spits from his corner.

“Katsuki!” she shouts. “This is not the time or the way to handle that.”

“I want my quirk back!”

“And you will get it,” she says, hoping for all their sakes’ she can keep that promise. “But first, we are going to go to the kitchen. I am going to get Izuku some ice and make sure he is okay. We are going to have a conversation. *Then* we will work on your quirk. Do you understand?”

Katsuki glares, but nods, and when Inko carefully picks Izuku up - monitoring his reactions to make sure he’s not in too much pain - and carries him to the kitchen, Katsuki maintains his distance, but follows behind without protest.

Across the table from Katsuki, Auntie is doting on the nerd, pressing ice against his head and hand and shining a small flashlight in his eyes. Katsuki sneers. Neither of them are paying attention to him, even though *he's* the one who should be upset right now. His chest aches and he keeps reaching out for a quirk that *isn't there* , like going down the stairs in the dark and forgetting that you still have one step left - thinking you're going to step onto solid ground and instead *plummeting* . He feels sick, he feels *angry*.

Auntie tells Izuku to go lay down, and then she turns to Katsuki.

"Are you alright?" she asks him.

"My quirk is gone," he bites back. Normally, he doesn't yell at Auntie, because she's so nice and Katsuki doesn't want to upset her, but that was a stupid question. Of course he's not alright. He doesn't have his quirk, and Auntie knows that, but she's just making him sit here and wait instead of doing something about it.

"Are you injured?" she asks, voice level. Auntie is angry, too, even if she's acting calm. Katsuki has never actually seen her mad before, but the way she snapped at him earlier was unmistakable. He wishes she would yell and get it over with.

"No."

"Izuku is injured. You hurt him."

"He shouldn't have taken my quirk if he didn't want to get hurt!"

"Katsuki!" Auntie snaps, the anger obvious again. "You can't just attack people, you can't go around hurting people on purpose."

"You're not supposed to steal things, either, but he did anyway!"

Auntie narrows her eyes at him, the expression harsh and unfamiliar on her usually kind face. She raps her hand against the edge of the table in front of Katsuki, where a small black stain mars the wood.

"Where did that come from?" she asks him. He frowns.

"I did it."

"Did I get mad at you?"

"No."

“And why not?”

“Because it was my quirk! I didn’t mean to.”

“Exactly,” Auntie says with a nod, like Katsuki has proven some kind of point, though he has no idea what it’s supposed to be. “I didn’t get mad because you didn’t mean to do it. You haven’t had your quirk for very long and you don’t have perfect control over it, yet. Accidents are normal.”

“So what?”

“Izuku had an accident. He didn’t *mean* to take your quirk. He didn’t even realize he did it. But he only got his quirk yesterday and he doesn’t know how to control it yet. Do you understand?”

Katsuki glares because he doesn’t. Maybe Izuku didn’t mean to, but the nerd *took* Katsuki’s quirk. *Izuku* was the one who had done the bad thing, the one who needed to be yelled at, not Katsuki.

“I want my quirk back,” is all he says.

“You’ll get it back,” Auntie sighs. “I’m sorry that this happened. I know it must be scary and overwhelming. But even if Izuku took it, even if you want it back, you *cannot* hurt people just because you’re scared or angry, Katsuki.”

Except he can, can’t he? Even without his quirk, Katsuki is strong - strong enough to hurt people. He can protect himself and get what he wants. That’s what strength is for.

“I’m not scared. He took it from me,” Katsuki insists. “That’s what villains do. Heroes hurt villains.”

“No, Katsuki,” Auntie says. “Heroes should never hurt people if they don’t have to. Heroes *save* people. Villains hurt people. *That’s* what villains do.”

“Are you calling me a villain?!” Katsuki demands, nearly screaming. He knows he’s right, she’s just saying he’s wrong because she’s angry he hurt Izuku, angry that *Izuku* was the villain.

“No, Katsuki. But you have done a very bad thing.”

“I want my quirk back!”

“I know. We’ll let Izuku sleep a bit and then we’ll see what we can do,

alright?"

Auntie sighs again, and leaves Katsuki sitting there, feeling like he's boiling over. It isn't fair. He hasn't done anything wrong, but here Auntie is, ignoring everything he says and *sighing* at him, while Izuku, *the villain* , takes a nice little nap. Katsuki was going to be a hero. He had an amazing quirk, but now he had *nothing* , and it was Izuku's fault.

"Katsuki," Auntie says, voice soft and trembling slightly. She sounds more like herself than she has all day. "I know this has been hard for you, but it's very important that you don't tell anyone about this. It could be dangerous if you do. I quirk like Izuku's - a lot of people would want to know about it."

Katsuki scoffs. "As if I'd tell anyone. I don't want anyone to think the nerd is stronger than me just because he *cheated* ."

Auntie gives him a snack that Katsuki doesn't eat, and she sits in the living room as if nothing is wrong for a full hour before going to get Izuku. And then she spends another hour talking softly to Izuku as the nerd fails to return Katsuki's quirk - "I'm trying, I swear!" - and snapping at Katsuki whenever he gets angry about it.

All in all, Katsuki's quirk is gone for just under three hours. They were the most horrible hours of his life.

Kacchan goes home early that day. He doesn't turn around to say goodbye and he slams the door behind him. Izuku doesn't think he'll come over again next weekend. Izuku doesn't blame him.

Izuku is tired. No, exhausted. He was tired after he took Kacchan's quirk, but then they fought, and then Izuku had to give it back, and returning the quirk was the most exhausting thing Izuku has ever had to do. He didn't even notice taking the quirk, really. It was easy to just *pull* it in, but *pushing* it back out felt unnatural. It was like how his mom's quirk could only attract objects, not repel them.

His mom's quirk. Izuku hasn't thought about it until now, but he guesses this means he didn't inherit his mom's quirk, afterall. He just stole it. He stole his own mother's quirk.

He turns towards her, tears already building in his eyes. “Mama, your quirk. I took it, just like I took Kacchan’s. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I can give it back!”

She wraps her arms around him and he can feel her crying against his hair. “No sweetie, not tonight. You’re so tired. It can wait, okay? I’ll be fine without my quirk for another day or two, just keep it safe for me, alright?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he repeats.

“I know, I know.”

She carries him into his bedroom and changes him into his PJs, even though it’s still fairly early. Half under the bed, Izuku’s favorite All Might action figure strikes it’s signature pose, and seeing it brings a fresh wave of tears to Izuku’s eyes. He picks it up, remembering the day before when it was his personal symbol of victory.

“Can I still be a hero?” he asks his mother, holding out the toy. She takes it with shaking hands, stares at it for a moment, then falls to her knees beside Izuku and throws her arms around him.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry,” she sobs into his shoulder. His own tears are silent.

It’s just like Kacchan said. Stealing was what villains did. If he stole, he would be a villain, and if he didn’t, he practically wouldn’t have a quirk, and how was he meant to be a hero, then?

Three months from his fifth birthday, Izuku Midoriya lays in his bed and vows to never practice using the quirk he has just received.

Chapter End Notes

Content warnings:
Some violence. It's Bakugo, he be like that. Fairly mild, I think.
Mild injuries.
Vague description of dissociation.

Izuku, before getting his quirk: I'm going to practice everyday!
Izuku, after getting his quirk: Never again.

Me: I want to write a short, sweet oneshot about afo izuku getting adopted by aizawa
My outline: 10k words

Me: This is not what we discussed.

Next chapter: Sludge Body
Complete, update: 10/29

Sludge Body

Chapter Notes

CW in end notes!

Thanks everyone for the support on the first chapter! All I can offer in return is my hottest of damns. I'll admit, I have some imposter syndrome when it comes to writing, so I hope this lives up to everyone's expectations. I'm not the most creative when it comes to plots, but I'm doing my best and having a good time. I hope you all enjoy!

Just so you know, this fic has a complete (and fairly detailed outline). It should be around 17 chapters, though that number may vary slightly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somewhere in Japan, there is a massive battle, a war between peace and evil that has been building for generations, though no one is aware of it, save a privileged and burdened few. Two men leave the battlefield on the brink of death, and the both of them, faced with the heavy knowledge that no one is truly immortal, begin considering their legacies.

The first man, confined to a hospital bed, missing several organs, contemplates the word "successor." The second, staring into blackness that is all he can see now, hooked to countless machines in an undisclosed but secure location, considers the word "son."

"Kurogiri," he calls, voice raspy and barely audible over the hiss and whine of the machinery around him, "bring me a phone."

A week after Izuku's quirk manifests, Inko calls Hisashi to tell him that their son is quirkless. It is the most important lie she has ever told, but it burns like a betrayal as it comes out of her mouth.

The betrayal, to clarify, has nothing to do with Hisashi. Inko holds no ill will to the man, but likewise doesn't believe him to be particularly

entitled to any truth about Izuku.

Inko and Hisashi never married and he left to work overseas shortly before Izuku was born. Their parting was amicable and Hisashi stayed in contact, checking in once every month or two and providing for his erstwhile lover and son quite generously in the meantime.

But Izuku was Inko's son far more than he was Hisashi's and any choice about Izuku's safety and wellbeing was hers to make, even to the complete exclusion of his father.

No, Inko doesn't hesitate before lying to Hisashi; her only compunction is with lying *about* Izuku.

Already, Izuku has internalized that his quirk is *bad* and concealing it this way feels like tacit agreement. She tells him that there's nothing wrong with him every single day, but she can't expect him to believe that when she tells him in the same breath that no one can ever know about his quirk as she gives him forged paperwork to hand in to his teachers.

Telling Hisashi that Izuku is quirkless, Inko fully expects him to disappear from their lives all together, and she isn't entirely wrong. Hisashi's limited presence in their lives noticeably declines, but to his credit, he does not abandon them entirely. He still calls on Izuku's birthday and major holidays and he never stops sending them money, even increasing the amount as Izuku gets bigger and more financially demanding. Still, he is far from winning any father of the year awards.

Reasonably, Inko is surprised when he calls on a random Tuesday when Izuku is nine years old, claiming he has wasted too much time and would like to get to know his son. But so long as Izuku wants to speak to him, Inko sees no reason to deny them contact, and Izuku is undeniably thrilled by the idea of having another positive adult figure in his life.

Before she passes Izuku the phone, she mutes the speaker and says, "Remember -"

"I'm quirkless," Izuku finishes for her with a bright smile that contrasts painfully with the tiredness in his eyes. "I know the drill."

She passes the phone over, brushing a hand over his hair as Izuku chirps his hello to his father and trails past her towards his room.

She stares at his door for a long moment after it closes, feeling distinctly like she has failed as a mother.

Katsuki watches Izuku carefully. For almost a month after the Incident, Katsuki ignores him, pretending he doesn't even exist, but then it occurs to Katsuki that no one else knows about *the quirk* . A week after what he did to Katsuki he came in with some paperwork and a story about how the doctor told him he was quirkless. It was bullshit, but it served its purpose because now no one is looking at the nerd, because no one cares about the weak, quirkless brat. But that means no one is watching him.

Someone *needs* to watch him, obviously. He needs to be kept in line, to make sure he doesn't forget his place - to make sure he doesn't get any big ideas. So Katsuki watches him, because no one else will, because no one else knows what Katsuki knows.

The extras in their class are too careless. Most of them avoid the nerd and some of them tease him, but some of them are still nice to him, talking to him or letting him hang around them, which can't be allowed to continue. They have no idea what they're dealing with, and if they get too close Izuku will take their quirks and then who knows what he'll do.

"Why are you talking to him?" Katsuki snaps at one of the nicest girls in their class, the fool who never wants anyone to be alone or left out. "He's just a worthless Deku."

The girl looks affronted and Izuku looks mortified, eyes wide and wet, but the majority of the class is giggling and parroting the name back and forth, so Katsuki knows it has worked. He'll make sure that Izuku is Deku, and then Deku will remember that he is useless and worthless and he won't get any ideas about using that awful quirk of his.

Later, Deku corners him on their walk home, running after Katsuki with disgusting determination.

"Why would you call me that, Kacchan?" he asks. Something cracks in Katsuki's chest and the sharp edges of it dig into his lungs.

"Don't call me that!" he snaps. His chest and throat are too tight, he

can't stand to look at Deku, and he struggles to breathe through the feeling that's choking him. He fights the urge to turn and run away. *Deku* should be running, not Katsuki; Katsuki never runs from anything.

"You should thank me, you know," Katsuki says, plastering a sneer on his face. "If people are calling you useless, they're not calling you a villain."

Katsuki doesn't need to say *even though they should be.* The words ring in the silence, an unspoken truth. The look on Deku's face makes it obvious that he hears them, too.

Good, Katsuki thinks savagely. Deku knows what he is.

When Katsuki turns, Deku stays there, frozen. He makes no attempt to follow, and Katsuki walks just slow enough that he cannot be accused of running away. If, when he is safe in his room, he chokes down sobs that are violent enough to make him ill, no one will ever know.

To say that Izuku doesn't use his quirk at all after the age of four would be an exaggeration, but only a slight one. He uses it on his mother, periodically, at her instance. Much to his chagrin, a degree of practice is necessary to gain control, but the idea of accidentally stealing quirks as he goes about his day is far worse than the idea of intentionally taking and returning his mother's to get a feel for how it works, even if it feels a bit like picking poisons.

He learns a few things about his quirk, all of it unavoidable, and he files the information in a mental catalogue that he prays never grows. He can take quirks from a distance, though the range is unknown. He can only return them with physical contact. It is far easier to take a quirk than to return one. Unless someone tries to use their quirk, they generally don't realize it's missing - his mother has described an "odd, but vague and non-urgent" feeling associated with missing her quirk. He can sense quirks around him, range still unknown, and has a certain intuition of their nature.

Guiltily, Izuku is rather thrilled by the last aspect. Quirks have always fascinated him. Possibly, this interest is a secondary effect of his own quirk, a natural fascination with what he is meant to steal and hoard,

but the idea makes Izuku feel slightly nauseous, so he comforts himself with the fact that his love of quirks long precedes the manifestation of his own.

Regardless, there's no denying the use of Izuku's quirk for his analysis hobby. Just from looking at his mother, he can tell you that her quirk is a type of weak, limited telekinesis centered on her own person. The information his quirk gives him isn't exhaustive, merely an impression of how a quirk functions that Izuku needs to interpret himself, leaving plenty of questions unanswered and applications unaddressed. He fills notebooks with his speculation, eagerly scratching out theories about the quirks of his classmate, his teachers, and even random people he passes on the street.

If he is lucky, he can get close enough to an active battle to read the quirks of both the heroes and the villains there. He does this more often than he probably should, skirting close to police lines and staring in awe at such amazing quirks in action. His mother would worry herself sick if she knew just how often Izuku wanders around after school searching for danger; she already worries, just having him out of her sight.

And he has to be very careful, because whenever he reaches out, there is a risk, no matter how small - and a temptation, no matter how deeply buried - that he will steal the quirk he is analyzing.

Izuku is very aware of the thin line he is walking. Seeing Katsuki everyday makes sure he never forgets, the reality of his situation always fresh in his mind.

Quirks are not deterministic. Having a certain quirk does not automatically make someone a hero or a villain or anything else. People choose what they are by the way they *use* their quirks.

Izuku has to believe this, because so long as it's true, he has the power to be something other than a villain. But that means never - *never* - using his quirk. Because as much as Izuku believes that having a quirk like his doesn't make him a villain by default, using it *would* . Villains use their quirks to hurt people.

And hurting people is all Izuku's quirk can do.

Hisashi Shigaraki calls his son at least once every other week or so. When he contacted Inko last year seeking to establish a line of communication, he had intended to speak to Izuku more frequently, to maximize his influence and firmly establish his presence in the boy's life. The regularity of his calls quickly decreased, though, when he realized just how trying it was to make routine conversation with a ten year-old boy.

Today, as Izuku babbles into his ear about one hero or another, Hisashi is reminded of why he so quickly relegated Tomura's care to Kurogiri. To his credit, Izuku is quite interesting for a young boy, and Hisashi is not indifferent to the fact that this boy is his *son* , his own flesh and blood, and is special and deserving of Hisashi's attention because of that. Hisashi does not regret reaching out to the boy, but he still sometimes dreads making these phone calls because of the way Izuku can talk and talk and *talk* .

"Sometimes I wish I had a quirk," Izuku confides in him, voice soft and uncertain.

At this, Hisashi gives the conversation his whole attention. If his son wants a quirk, Hisashi could certainly provide. Perhaps that would be a good way to bring Izuku into the fold, to begin molding him and helping him to reach his full potential.

Then Izuku adds, "A *good* one," and Hisashi experiences a rare moment of surprise as he considers the implications.

It is an unusual specification for a quirkless child to make, especially one like Izuku, who once rambled eagerly for nearly an hour about a quirk he had seen that could make any object the user touched a slightly different color. It seems that the boy has almost an equal amount of enthusiasm for any quirk he encounters, from the most mundane to those of pro heroes.

"You are perfect the way you are," Hisashi assures him idly, because that is what a parent should say, even if it's not true.

The conversation comes to a close, but Izuku's remark lingers in Hisashi's mind long after, always on the edge of his thoughts. What is a good quirk and what is a bad quirk, and what do both of those things look like through the eyes of a quirk-obsessed but supposedly-quirkless boy?

Hisashi smiles to himself, thankful, not for the first time, that he decided that his son was worth investing time into after all. This

mystery holds Hisashi's attention for days and he turns it over and over in his head, inspecting it from all angles like a shiny new toy he can't bear to put down.

Izuku is aware that he shouldn't walk home through back alleys or under bridges. He could be attacked, his mother always tells him, quoting statistics about dangerous parts of the city and bad things that can happen to children who wander off alone. Of course, there were some days when he was in just as much danger - if not more - walking along the standard route, because Katsuki and his friends took the same track home.

Experience has taught Izuku that he wouldn't be safe walking home the normal way today, because today the class was talking about what they wanted to do when they grow up and Izuku had told everyone that he wanted to be a hero. Katsuki, never far from anger where Izuku is concerned, always reaches a special, incandescent level of rage when Izuku mentions his dreams.

You are the thing that people need saving from , Katsuki's voice says in Izuku's head.

If you want to defeat a villain, start with yourself. Do us all a favor.

So Izuku takes his longer, back route - the one his mother would say is dangerous, but that Izuku has never actually gotten hurt on. Ironically, he calls this his "safe path," though he would never say as much to his mom. He can perfectly imagine the guilt that would fill her eyes in response, and he has no desire to see it for real.

He is passing under a familiar bridge - grimy and graffitied, but peaceful - when he finally sees the statistics his mother is always fretting about in action. It happens exactly as Izuku is walking through, not a second sooner or later, in a horrifying mockery of serendipity. The manhole cover that Izuku trods over at least once a week rattles in its grate, and a thick, viscous fluid seeps up around its edges.

As soon as he sees it, Izuku knows that it's a quirk, that he's staring at a person, even if they aren't particularly person-shaped. The sludge forms together quickly, a stinking mass that barely bothers to be

anthropomorphic. Bulging eyes and wide, square teeth are the only standard human features this person has maintained.

Dread rolls through Izuku's stomach, but, he reasons to himself, nothing has happened yet. This sludge person's quirk is intimidating, sure, but that doesn't mean anything. They could just be another citizen going about their day, their path happening to cross Izuku's like so many others that Izuku doesn't even take notice of. This dread is judgemental of him, not to mention hypocritical, he tells himself, even as he begins to tremble.

Then their eyes meet. The sludge person grins. In the absence of lips, it's their teeth that move, shifting through their liquid body to form an arch that feels like a parody of a smile.

A paralyzing realization hits Izuku. It's something he had known in theory, but had never integrated into his reality, and now the two are crashing together like opposing waves, catching Izuku in the cross tide. Not every person with a "villainous" quirk is a villain, but some of them *are.* One of them is standing in front of him. Izuku is not going to be allowed to simply walk out of this alleyway.

Izuku doesn't have time to think - even if he did, he likely wouldn't be able to, his mind stuck spinning in terrified circles. He only moves. He throws his bag, slinging it one-handed over his shoulder as he pivots on his heels to run back the way he came. He aims for the villain's eyes, but it is mostly by luck that one of his school books flies free and hits his target. Izuku doesn't see the impact, already scrambling to get back to a main road, where the presence of witnesses promises some kind of safety, either because the villain will give up pursuit or because a hero will intervene. The villain bellows in pain, the sound deep and wet and furious.

Izuku makes it four steps, each one jolting up his shins and rattling the bones of his legs, jarring in a way Izuku has never associated with running. His fifth step doesn't connect.

Tendrils of murky green liquid wrap around Izuku's waist, anchoring him in place and growing thicker as more of the villain's mass flows towards him. Then, when the hold on him is strong enough, Izuku himself is dragged backwards, the soles of his shoes scrambling uselessly against the asphalt as he sinks deeper into the shadow of the bridge. The villain says something, but their words are lost to the pounding of blood in Izuku's ears as the sludge envelops him.

Izuku cannot hear or see or breathe or think. In only seconds, the sludge invades his mouth, coating his teeth and tongue, racing down his throat and into his lungs.

It smells like sewage.

It tastes like death.

Izuku is going to die.

You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.

Izuku thinks about that saying a lot. Sometimes he stays up at night, wondering how long he would have to live before becoming a villain like Katsuki always says. He wonders what it would take for someone like him to die a hero.

He has never thought about the way that some people just die. They die boring, civilian deaths. Or they die like he is about to - pathetically and futilely, too good to be a villain, but too weak to be anything else.

Some people die worthless, useless deaths. He will die proving Katsuki right about at least one thing.

His hands claw ineffectually at slime that slips through his fingers. He kicks his legs weakly, but he can no longer find the ground. He twists and turns, but nothing changes. In the last moments, fading fast, no longer able to tell which way is up, Izuku finds something solid and he grips it.

Panicked and desperate, Izuku grasps at the villain's quirk and it comes away so easily when Izuku pulls that he doesn't immediately realize what it is he's grabbed. It's only when the quirk comes to him that Izuku realizes what is happening, because this time the quirk does not settle inside him in the same effortless and unnoticeable way as the few others Izuku has taken.

The sludge villain's quirk doesn't *fit* inside Izuku. This quirk is made for a flexible, amorphous blob and Izuku is rigidly boy-shaped. It is a square peg and Izuku is a round hole. He takes it with no issue, but he cannot *have* it the way he always has before. He holds it in metaphysical hands and feels it dripping through his fingers, suspended in some nowhere, in-between space.

The villain writhes around him, the sludge that comprises their entire

body briefly growing thick and clumpy, like curdled milk, before rapidly thinning out. Izuku falls through it, landing on damp, sticky pavement. His legs can't support him and he collapses to his knees, then his hands, then his elbows. He doesn't feel the impacts.

Sludge - if it can still be called that now that it's barely thicker than water - pours down around him, flowing from his hair and off every edge of his body. He coughs and gags as he vomits the stuff out, lungs and stomach urgently evacuating their contents. Toxic slime mixes with bile and acid and it runs down his chin and out his nose, burning and itching on his skin. He gasps for breath whenever he can, vision still spotty from oxygen deprivation.

Izuku doesn't understand what has happened, doesn't understand why the villain has seemingly fled, and his body is unable to trust that he's safe. Several small, solid somethings bounce off of his head and back, clattering loudly across the ground. Adrenaline still running high, Izuku's attention snaps to the noise even while he's struggling to stay conscious.

His eyes find those of the sludge villain, laying disconnected on the ground nearly a foot apart, staring unseeing in entirely different directions. The noise was likely from the teeth, scattered about like haphazard, macabre confetti.

Izuku still holds the sludge quirk in his hand and he lets it go now, hoping that everything will come right back together like nothing happened, even if that means the villain will attack again and actually kill Izuku this time. He hopes and he watches, but the eyes he's staring at stay dead even as the quirk is freed, slipping away from Izuku's fingers to some place where he can't feel it anymore.

He vomits again.

Collapsing to the side, Izuku stares at the light beyond the bridge. With evening approaching, the world is starting to take on a slightly orange tint and the shadows that Izuku is laying in are starting to slant and grow darker. He remembers the panicked things he thought when he was sure that *he* was going to be the one to die, here.

He asked himself a question: how long would he have to live before he became the villain?

He answers it now: ten years, apparently.

Inko gets home later than she would like, but thankfully not so late that she can't throw something frozen into the oven for dinner. Shifts at the hospital can be long and unpredictable, but she always does her best to be home so she and Izuku can eat together, working hard to make their home as safe and stable as she can for her son. The money from Hisashi is a huge help with that, allowing Inko to work far less than she would otherwise have to as a single mother.

Izuku's shoes are not by the door, but his bag is dropped haphazardly not too far from the entrance. The shower is running. Inko doesn't think Izuku has ever been in the shower when she's come home. A disquieted feeling settles over her like a shroud, anxiety twisting in her stomach, but only when she looks down the hall and sees the bathroom door open does she panic. She races into the bathroom, sparring no worry for privacy or modesty, all her thoughts occupied by the certainty that something is wrong with her child.

She finds him sitting fully clothed in the shower. The curtain is left open and puddles have formed on the tile around the tub. Water plasters his hair to his face and his uniform to his skin. His skin is pale; his eyes are closed. Inko's heart drops like a stone into her stomach.

He is not dead, she tells herself. He was fine this morning and he will be fine again. They will both be fine.

Recently, Izuku has gotten too big for Inko to pick up comfortably, but that doesn't stop her from lifting him now. Even sopping wet, Inko pulls him into her arms, hauling him over the lip of the tub and into her lap without even registering his weight. He is cold, limp, and unresponsive as she cradles him.

Fumbling, numb hands move to Izuku's neck and Inko is shaking so badly she fears she won't be able to find his pulse, but it's there - strong and unmistakable beneath her fingers. She curls around him and his breath stirs her hair. He's alive. As long as he's alive everything will be okay.

Mustering up all her will, Inko seals up the part of herself that wants to break down crying and gets to work. There will be time for tears later, when she can allow herself to be a mother. Now, she needs to be a nurse.

First, to get him warm. She strips Izuku of his clothes, carefully moving his limbs around and checking for any injuries as she goes. His palms, elbows, and knees all have abrasions. It is obvious that he fell, since the scrapes are paired with bruises and small amounts of grit remain in the wounds. They are worse on his hands, likely because the other areas were somewhat protected by his uniform, but overall, the damage is fairly superficial. His right wrist is slightly swollen, and Inko prods at it gently, hoping it is merely sprained, rather than fractured or broken. As far as Inko can tell, Izuku is otherwise unharmed, at least physically.

Wet fabric slaps against wet flooring as she tosses his uniform aside. She leaves him in the bathroom for a painful moment, raiding cabinets for every towel and blanket and leaving the blankets in Izuku's room and then returning to him with the towels. The shower is still going and she turns it off, ears ringing in the sudden silence, before carefully beginning to soak the majority of excess water from Izuku's skin and hair.

When he is no longer dripping, Inko swaddles him in one of the dry towels, wrapping one around his head for his hair, and lifts him to carry him to his room. Once again, she leaves him, no easier now than it was minutes ago, this time to retrieve the first aid kit from the bathroom cabinet. Methodically, she cleans debris from his scrapes, cleans them with alcohol, smears an antibiotic cream over the raw flesh, and bandages them up. She splints his wrist, fairly certain it's only sprained. The towel around Izuku's head has gotten damp, so Inko replaces it with a fresh one before covering him with blankets.

Already, Izuku's skin has regained some of its warmth and color, though that's small comfort when he's still unconscious. All Inko can do now is monitor him and wait, growing more nervous with each moment he doesn't wake. His injuries seem mild, leading Inko to believe that it's just shock or exhaustion keeping him asleep, but the fear that he's sustained some unseen damage haunts her. She will wait half an hour, she tells herself, and then they are going to the hospital.

While she waits, Inko lets herself cry.

Izuku's eyes flutter open exactly seventeen minutes later. His stare is hazy, perhaps a bit dazed, but he doesn't seem to have any trouble focusing on Inko, which she takes as a good sign. Tears build in his eyes almost instantly as Inko struggles to stop her own and compose herself.

“Mama,” he says, voice so gravely and raw that Inko’s throat aches in sympathy, “I’m sorry.”

Any progress Inko has made at holding back her tears is obliterated. “Baby, why are you apologizing? Don’t apologize. It’s okay, everything is okay, now.”

He shakes his head, something wild rising in his eyes as he struggles to sit up, wincing in pain as he braces his hands on the bed. Inko reaches to the table where she has already prepared a glass of water and some painkillers, passing them to Izuku who swallows them desperately. He chugs all the water and Inko considers offering him more, but is too reluctant to leave him just yet.

“I did a bad thing,” he tells her, staring blankly at the empty glass in his hands.

“What happened?” she asks softly.

“I hurt someone. Real bad. With my quirk.”

If Izuku’s quirk is involved, this is worse than Inko imagined.

Unlike most people, including Izuku himself, Inko does not fear her son’s quirk. She probably would, if it belonged to anyone other than Izuku, but she knows her baby boy, and she knows that all he has ever wanted is to help people. But the rest of the world wouldn’t know that. They wouldn’t understand that, even if Izuku’s quirk had so many horrifying and immediately obvious applications, he would never use it that way. People would be afraid of him and they would want to hurt him, lock him up. Or worse, *use* him.

Inko can’t allow it to happen. It’s why she’s broken so many laws over the years to pretend that Izuku is quirkless. It’s why she tolerated the pain in his eyes, why she grit her teeth and watched as his bubbling optimism slowly became more and more reserved, even though it killed her inside. She wants Izuku to be able to be proud of who he is. She wants him to be able to live his life freely and happily. But most of all she wants him to be safe.

“Izuku,” she says, tone serious but still as gentle as she can make it. “I need you to tell me what happened. It’s going to be okay. I’ll fix it for you, I promise.”

“You can’t,” he sobs. “You can’t fix it. They’re dead.”

Inko schools herself not to react, keeping the shock and fear off her face. That certainly makes things more complicated. But she meant what she said. She will do anything she can to keep Izuku safe. Inko won't let anything as trivial as a dead body or Izuku's quirk being revealed stop her from protecting her baby.

They could always leave Japan. Inko is sure that if she asks, Hisashi can get them plane tickets to America. He probably wouldn't even ask many questions; he has always been a discrete type of man.

She takes Izuku's hands between her own and forces him to meet her eyes.

"Tell me *everything* ."

He does and as he gets more and more distressed through the course of his tale, Inko oscillates between horrified, enraged, and relieved. Horrified that Izuku has had to experience this, enraged that anyone dared to touch him, and relieved that the situation is not half so dire as she assumed.

"I'm a villain," he tells her, broken-hearted and sincere.

"You're not."

"I am. I used my quirk to hurt someone. Only villains do that."

"You did it to save yourself. That's what heroes do. You're a hero."

"I'm not."

"You *are* ," Inko insists, meaning it with every fiber of her being. "You are *my hero* . I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you, Izuku. You survived and you came home to me. That's the best thing you could have done."

Whatever response he has - certainly an argument to the contrary - is lost to his sobs. He curls up in Inko's lap and lets her rock him, humming soothing sounds and reassuring him over and over that he has done nothing wrong. He falls asleep in her arms, to her narrative of love and support, and she hopes it will seep into his dreams.

Inko doesn't leave him for a long time that night. She holds Izuku like he is still a toddler and tries to figure out what this means for them.

Her first concern, for the moment, has to be Izuku's health. While he

escaped the assault miraculously uninjured, the sludge he described could have had any number of pathogens inside it. Taking Izuku to the hospital would draw too much attention to the already delicate situation, so for the moment she'll have to monitor him for any signs of infection or illness. Hopefully she'll be able to pull a sample of the sludge from Izuku's bag. She has a friend at the hospital who would be willing to run tests on it on the downlow, and that'll give her a better idea of whether there are any urgent issues.

Thankfully, she is reasonably sure that Japan won't immediately become unsafe for them. Izuku is young and the person who attacked him was doubtlessly a villain. It's entirely possible that the death won't even be noticed. Even if it is, it would need to be traced back to Izuku, and then there was still only a small chance that anyone would try to prosecute him, a child who had a quirk accident while defending himself against a villain.

But there is the issue of Izuku's quirk. He used it outside the house, where any number of people or cameras could have seen. Maybe it isn't unreasonable to assume that no one is aware of what happened, but that assumption is *dangerous* , and Inko's concern, first and foremost, is with Izuku's safety.

It would be best to leave, Inko decides. Just in case. It might not be necessary, but it's not as if they will be leaving that much behind. There are more reasons to leave than to stay.

For the first time she can remember, Inko calls Hisashi instead of the other way around. He doesn't answer and Inko tries not to get impatient as she waits for a response. She calls again after an hour. Then again the hour after that.

Finally, Hisashi calls her back.

"Is everything alright?" he asks in place of a greeting. "It's late there, isn't it?"

"Yes. Would you be willing to buy plane tickets for me and Izuku?" There is a pause. Hisashi's response, when it comes, is decidedly neutral.

"Plane tickets?"

"To America."

"You want to come to the states."

“I think a change of scenery would be good for Izuku,” she says honestly. “You know that school isn’t kind to him and it’s only getting worse as he gets older. America has a larger population of quirkless people and I’ve read that they’re better treated because of it.”

Hisashi is quiet for another long moment.

“Besides,” Inko adds, “wouldn’t you like to meet your son?”

“Of course,” Hisashi finally answers, “I’ll make the arrangements.”

Tension that has been spooling in Inko’s gut releases so quickly it leaves her slightly dizzy. She grips the arm of her chair tightly enough that all the blood leaves her knuckles.

“Is next week too early for you?” Hisashi asks. “I can book something later if you need more time to prepare.”

“No. Next week is perfect.”

Inko hangs her head back and closes her eyes, relief pulsing over her as Hisashi talks about the details of the arrangement. Moving will be an adjustment, but it’s worth it to keep Izuku safe, and she truly does believe that a new start could be good for him.

Inko bids her goodbyes, but Hisashi interrupts her before she can hang up.

“I’m glad you called,” is the last thing he says to her. "I’ve been wanting to see Izuku in person for a while now.”

Chapter End Notes

CW
Character death: sludge villain (described)
Violence, vomiting, panic attacks, dissociation
Mild injuries
At one point Izuku is pretty convinced he's about to die and at another, Inko is pretty convinced he IS dead

Izuku: *uses quirk on sludge villain in self-defense*
Sludge Villain: *straight up dies*
Izuku: NEVER. AGAIN.

Next chapter: All for One
Complete, upload: 11/5

I'll do my best to get it out by then, but it's already about 3k with only 2.5/11 scenes done. I might shift a scene or two back, but I think it's destined to be a long one. If anything changes, I'll update this note to reflect that
(edit 10/31: 5 scenes done, between 4 and 6 more to go, chapter is already 6.5k)

All for One - Part I

Chapter Notes

> CW! End notes!!!
>
> Part I? Part I. This chapter got too long, so I split it. Part II will be up on TUESDAY, as a kind of bonus update. This is the last chapter of backstory, so I didn't want to delay getting to the main plot if I didn't have to. If I have to split chapters in the future, I'll probably post the parts on the normal schedule, an entire week apart, because hot DAMN was this a lot to keep up with in a single week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days after the incident with the sludge villain, Izuku is called to the principal's office where the police are waiting for him. His stomach sinks, but he doesn't panic. He doesn't even cry. He is scared because he doesn't know exactly what is going to happen to him now, and he is sad because all of his mother's hard work to make a life for them in America is going to waste, but mostly, he is resigned and accepting.

This is nothing less than what he deserves, he tells himself, and if his inner voice sounds like Katsuki, that's just because Katuski was right all along. Izuku is a villain now, and villains go to jail. He just hopes his mother won't get into any trouble.

"Izuku," someone says. He recognizes the voice, but he's so surprised to hear it here that it takes him a moment to place it.

He blinks and turns his head, noticing for the first time that his Aunt Mitsuki is sitting in one of the chairs in front of the principal's unoccupied desk.

Why is Auntie here? Is it because of Katsuki? Did Katsuki finally tell her that Izuku is a villain? Is she the one who turned him in?

She doesn't *look* mad, though, which is what Izuku would expect from someone looking at a villain. Izuku isn't sure how she looks. He's never seen her face like it is right now, as she reaches a hand out to him. Reflexively, he takes it, and she pulls him towards her until he is close enough to hug, tucking his head under her chin. It's odd; Auntie has never been a hugger, preferring to show her affection by ruffling

hair or bumping shoulders.

“What’s going on?” he asks, words sounding distant to his own ears.

“Midoriya-kun,” one of the officers says, speaking far more gently than Izuku deserves, considering what he has done. “This is about your mother.”

His mother? Panic spikes in Izuku’s chest. He has accepted that he needs to be punished for what he did, but his mom has nothing to do with that. Are the police blaming her, instead? Izuku has no doubt she would let them if it meant keeping Izuku safe. Maybe that’s why Auntie is here - because his mom has been arrested for Izuku’s crimes and now he’s going to have to stay with the Bakugos.

“What about my mom?” he asks in a rush. “Where is she? Can I see her?”

“No, Izu-kun,” Aunt Mitsuki says into his hair, voice strangely muffled.

“I’m sorry, but you’re mother has been in an accident -”

Izuku’s world narrows, his vision tunneling, sights and sounds growing more and more distant. His mother has been in an accident, he thinks to himself.

His mother has been in an accident .

He can feel hands on his face, grounding him, holding him down so he can’t float away. Auntie’s palms are soft and familiar, but her red eyes are filled with tears and Izuku has never seen her cry before. Oddly, Izuku doesn’t think *he’s* crying, because he can still see, even if everything around him looks slightly off, like he’s in a dream. Maybe he’s dreaming. Maybe that’s why his -

His mother has been in an accident .

The officers are saying something, their mouths moving in turns, but Izuku can’t hear them - or he isn’t listening, but what difference does that make.

His eyes slide over to the dying plant in the corner. The edges of its leaves are yellow and brittle, crumbling and cracking under the slightest pressure. Izuku pities it. As long as he has known about it, the plant has been dying. It never just *dies* ; it has been *dying* for years

and that sounds terrible.

Izuku's fingers tingle, even though the sensation feels far away. He wonders if they would crumble and crack if he bent them, like perpetually dying foliage.

The officers nod, say one last thing, and then leave. Auntie kisses Izuku's forehead, hugs him tight for a moment, and then stands. She holds his hand and leads him out of the room, towards the school entrance. Izuku stares at his fingers, folded around hers. They are still attached, even though he feels so brittle, like he should break, not bend.

"Are we going to the hospital?" Izuku asks as Auntie buckles him into the back seat of her car, because *his mother has been in an accident* so she must be in the hospital now. Auntie stares at him like he is some foreign creature. Or maybe like he is a dying plant.

"No, we're not," she says.

She drives them home, instead. To the Bakugo's home, that is. The journey blurs around Izuku and he loses track of where he is and what's happening until suddenly they're there, the car already off, Izuku's seat belt already undone, and Auntie already tugging him out of his seat with uncharacteristically gentle hands.

Izuku's apartment is just down the street. He can walk there from here - he did all the time when he was small and Katsuki was still his friend. He turns that way now, but Aunt Mitsuki grabs him by the hand and leads him into the house.

"When do I get to see my mom?"

"Izuku. She's gone."

Gone where, he wonders. She wouldn't leave for America without him. He is the whole reason they have to leave in the first place.

"She's dead."

His mother has been in an accident .

Izuku is familiar with death in a way that most children, even most adults, are not. He has faced death, he has felt it all around him. *His mother has been in an accident* the same way the sludge villain was in an accident when they met Izuku.

He hears his mother's voice in his ears, an echo from just days ago that feels so far away now that he'll never hear it again.

I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you, Izuku .

What is he meant to do, now that he has lost *her?*

When Katsuki gets home, his old hag meets him at the door. Deku had been pulled out of class halfway through the day and never returned, leaving Katsuki in a good mood that teeters precariously as his mother sticks an arm out and blocks his path towards his room. Her eyes are swollen, he realizes, and her usually perfect complexion is red and blotchy.

"What's wrong with you?" he barks. He shoves her arm out of his way, but she raises it again in an instant.

"Katsuki," the old hag says, level and grave, "Inko died this afternoon."

Katsuki freezes. He has barely seen Inko Midoriya since he was four years old. He hasn't wanted to, never forgetting the way she treated him the day of Izuku's violation, acting as if *Katsuki* was the fucking problem. But despite the stain of that memory, Katsuki often remembers how *kind* Auntie Inko was to him. Even when Katsuki was being a little piece of shit, she never raised her voice with him. Except for that one day, she always gave him the benefit of the doubt, treating him with a care he never experienced anywhere else. Often, enviously, he had wished that Auntie Inko was *his* mother, and Izuku could have the old hag, who was always so much nicer to him, anyway.

"What happened?" he asks, sounding small and lost in a way that makes him growl under his breath a second later.

"There was a villain attack at the hospital and she got caught up in it."

"The villain?"

"Died while the heroes were attempting to subdue him."

"Good," Katsuki spits. For once his mother does not yell at him about

his too-casual attitude towards death and violence.

“Izuku is in the guest room,” she says instead.

The loss and yearning that rose inside Katsuki at the news of Auntie’s death drain away, leaving familiar, hollow anger in their wake. His mother must be able to read it on his face because she scowls at him.

“He’s only here for the night,” she tells him, like that makes it fucking okay. “His father booked the first flight from the states, he’s probably already on his way. He’ll have picked Izuku up before you get home tomorrow.”

Katsuki sneers. “I don’t fucking want him here.”

“He has nowhere else to go. That boy’s entire world just shattered and the least we can do for Inko is give him a place to stay for the night. You *will* be civil to him.”

“I won’t bother him if he doesn’t bother me.”

They stare at each other for an intense moment before the old hag sighs. She grabs him by the hair, shaking his head from side to side and ignoring the way he shouts about it.

“Good. Now go do your homework or whatever it is you do, brat.”

Katsuki bats her hands away, moving towards his room before she finishes her sentence. Down the hall, the door of the guest room is ajar, and Katsuki stops to glare at it, fists flexing, before scoffing and yanking the door to his own room open. He slams it behind him.

Like every evening, Katsuki spreads his work over his desk and sets about getting it done. Normally, he doesn’t struggle in the slightest, working easily through anything the extras at school throw at him. Today, though, he can’t concentrate. His eyes keep drifting towards the wall that connects his room to the one that goddamned *Deku* is in, upper lip twitching in an unconscious sneer.

Deku is in his house, in the next room, breathing Katsuki’s air and probably getting it all shitty and contaminated. It’s like Deku’s last act of fucking with Katsuki’s life. Auntie dies, and the nerd is going to go away to live in the US with his father, finally out of Katsuki’s hair forever, but first he’s just got to come in here and invade Katsuki’s home first.

Katsuki's pencil snaps in his fist. Splinters of wood dig into his palm and he curses, dropping the pencil halves and shaking his hand out. A small sliver of the shit has embedded itself beneath his skin and he digs at it with his thumb for a moment before cursing again when he can't get it out. He shoves himself away from his desk, making a general racket as he slams his chair backwards.

"Knock it off!" the old hag shouts from somewhere else in the house when Katsuki's door bangs against the wall as he throws it open. He rolls his eyes, storming to the bathroom to get the fucking tweezers and maybe a bandaid or something, too, if he's actually going to end up bleeding just because he broke his stupid goddamned pencil.

The guest room is between Katsuki and the bathroom and the door is open enough for him to see inside.

Izuku sits on the bed, back against the headboard with his arms wrapped around a pillow he holds in his lap. He is staring blankly towards the door and Katsuki freezes as their eyes unintentionally meet, though it isn't entirely clear whether Izuku actually *sees* him. The nerd isn't doing anything; he's just sitting there, all empty-eyed. It's fucking creepy, is what it is.

Katsuki resists the urge to snap, sure that wherever his mother is, she is listening closely and primed to start screaming at him if he steps a toe out of line. Gritting his teeth so hard his jaw aches, he tears his eyes from Izuku and turns back towards the bathroom, clinging tightly to a thin thread of restraint.

Then, so softly Katsuki will wonder if he imagined it, Izuku says, "I think you were right about me, Kacchan."

Katsuki shudders violently, body going numb as his abruptly racing pulse fills his ears. He does not turn back towards the guest room. He thinks he can feel Izuku's eyes on him, a stare so cold it burns and so empty it swallows everything it meets. A small, hysterical part of Katsuki - a part he refuses to acknowledge, much less indulge - is certain that if he turns his head to the side Izuku will be *right there* , hollow gaze filling the gap between the door and its frame.

Resolutely looking at the opposite wall, Katsuki does a 180, returns to his room with measured, equal steps and locks the door behind him. He does not run. There's no reason for him to run away from that shitty, useless weakling. This is *his* house and Katsuki doesn't run from anything.

And things that run are often chased.

The man who comes to pick Izuku up from the Bakugo household early the next afternoon is not his father.

“Hisashi,” Auntie Mistuki greets as she opens the door, “I can’t say I’m glad to see you again, considering the circumstances.”

“Yes,” the man beyond the door responds, “I suppose I would rather have never seen you again at all. I’m sorry for your loss, Mitsuki.”

“Izuku has lost far more than I have.”

At that, both adults’ attention moves to where Izuku stands, hovering just past the entryway and watching their interaction with tired, wary eyes. He stares at the stranger, more alert than he has been since he received the news about his mother.

The man has golden amber eyes and a smattering of freckles. His hair is a mass of dark and wild curls. Likely, he is taller than Izuku will ever be, and his features are long and thin where Izuku’s are round, but the resemblance between them is obvious. Izuku, as it turns out, was a perfect combination of his parents’ features, and no one would be able to look at the pair of them and not identify them as closely related.

But this man is not his father.

Izuku’s father has a fire breathing quirk. This is one of relatively few facts Izuku knows about Hisashi Akatani. The man at the door does not have a fire breathing quirk. Izuku is not entirely sure what his quirk actually *is,* a new and disconcerting sensation. He can still sense it, but can’t identify it. The quirk is tangled and shifting and seems to be shouting too much conflicting information that Izuku can’t make sense of. It makes his head hurt.

“Izuku,” the man says, “I am so sorry this has happened to you.”

His voice is soft and sounds sincere, but he is clearly lying about who he is so Izuku has no reason to trust anything else he says. Izuku cuts his eyes to Aunt Mitsuki, wondering if he should say something.

Would she believe him? What could she do about it if she did? He stays quiet as the man walks past Aunt Mitsuki with a nod, coming to stand in front of Izuku.

“Are you going to take me to America?” Izuku asks him.

“I’m going to take you home,” the man replies.

“My home is down the street.”

The man’s eyes soften, losing a guardedness that Izuku didn’t notice until it was gone.

“It was,” the man agrees. “I’m hoping we can make a new one, together.”

Izuku does not want a new home, especially not with this imposter, even if he seems nice enough. Izuku wants to go back to the apartment and be greeted by the smell of his mother’s cooking. He wants to see her standing in the kitchen, hear her humming to herself, smell her shampoo as she hugs him close to welcome him home. This man, father or not, can’t give Izuku that. Nothing can, because it doesn’t exist anymore.

The man kneels in front of him, “I know that’s not what you want right now. It might even sound impossible. But it’s my job to take care of you, and I promise I’ll do that as well as I can.”

The man reaches out a hand, silently asking for permission to touch, and Izuku stares at it for a long moment. He doesn’t know who this person is, why he is here, or where Izuku’s actual father is. But Izuku finds that he doesn’t particularly care. He knows he should, in a distant sort of way, but he can’t actually find it inside himself.

Today Izuku is going home with a strange man, who will take him away from everything he knows and nothing will ever be the same again. This would be true, even if it was actually Izuku’s father crouching in front of him. Whether the stranger is his father or some other person wearing his father’s face makes little difference in the end.

Izuku puts his hand in the man’s and lets himself be pulled into a gentle hug. It’s nice. The man is bigger and more solid than Aunt Mitsuki, and he smells of something smokey and sharp. The man lets Izuku go and stands, turning back to Auntie who has been watching them with drawn brows.

“Thank you for keeping him safe for me, but we should probably be going. I can’t be away from work for long, so we’ll be catching a flight back state-side this evening and I want to make sure we have time to pack up anything he wants to keep from the apartment.”

Auntie bites her lip, “I understand. I’ll walk you over. I - I still have Inko’s spare key, so I can let you in.”

The walk to the apartment is short and silent. Auntie’s tension contrasts perfectly against the man’s reserved stoicism. Between the two adults, Izuku’s shorter legs set their pace, and he stares down at their feet, barely blinking. The man’s shoes seem unreal against the cracked concrete of the sidewalk, perfectly polished and unscuffed dress shoes that Izuku thinks would look out of place anywhere except a high end department store. His suit is the same, pristine and perfectly pressed as if the man has not spent the last day darting between airports on different sides of the world.

“I can take it from here,” the man says, firm but not unkind, after Aunt Mitsuki fumbles the door to the Midoriya apartment open.

She blinks, “Oh. Right.”

Her eyes drift to Izuku and she hesitates for a moment before dropping down next to him, placing one hand on his shoulder and the other on the side of his face.

“We’re going to miss you so much,” she tells him. “I expect you to call, alright? Just because you’re going away doesn’t mean you have to be *gone* . We can still talk whenever you want. If you ever need anything, Masaru and I will still be there for you, just like always, no matter how far away we are. Love you, kiddo.”

“I love you, too.”

She pulls him into a long, tight hug, then stands and stares at him for a moment, as if committing him to memory. Izuku does the same, not knowing when he’ll see her next. Aunt Mitsuki was practically a second mother to him, even if he saw her less frequently after his accident with Katsuki, and now he is losing her, too.

He watches as she walks away down the hall, watches still even after she disappears, until the man who is not his father places a hand on his shoulder and steers Izuku into the apartment. The door closes behind them and Izuku is alone with the stranger.

“Feel free to grab anything you need,” the man says, “but only things that are important. Anything else can be replaced when we get where we’re going.”

Izuku leads the way to his room. The man glances around but says nothing as Izuku pulls a suitcase from his closet and begins sorting through his belongings for those that have sentimental value. He puts aside some of his favorite clothes, an All Might plush he and Katsuki had gotten together before their relationship imploded, photos of his mother that he can’t stand to look at but can’t leave behind, the quirk analysis notebooks that he has poured so much time into. The man sits on Izuku’s bed and watches in silence.

“Who are you?” Izuku asks. The man raises his eyebrows, says nothing.

“You’re not my father,” Izuku persists. “Who are you?”

“I work for your father.”

“Oh. Are you bringing me to him?”

“As soon as you are done here, yes.”

“How do you look like him?”

“A quirk of an associate. Your father was unable to come retrieve you in person, but it seemed unlikely that your temporary guardians would hand you over to a stranger. A degree of deception seemed prudent.”

“What’s your name?”

“You may call me Kurogiri.”

“And your quirk?”

The man smiles with an edge, “You ask a lot of questions, don’t you, Izuku Shigaraki.”

“Midoriya,” Izuku corrects, frowning. “I’m sorry. You don’t need to answer them.”

“It’s fine. An inquisitive mind is something your father values. Knowledge is power, after all. As for my quirk, you’ll see soon enough. Are you finished?”

Izuku has not found anything new to put into the suitcase for nearly three minutes. He looks down at it, one side still nearly empty. Izuku has more things, of course, but none of them truly matter to him. His life, he thinks, is painfully empty. The most important thing in it was his mother. With her, it didn't matter what else he had. But now she is gone, and Izuku the contents of Izuku's life can be condensed to one side of a relatively small piece of luggage.

"Not quite," is all he tells the man, Kurogiri, before leaving his own bedroom to go to his mother's. Kurogiri does not follow, and Izuku is glad. He doesn't want the stranger in his mom's room.

The bed is still unmade and there are sticky notes on the dresser, reminders of tasks that Izuku's mother would never get around to fulfilling. On the side table, there is a framed picture of the two of them and a locket. Izuku takes the picture, pressing it against his chest so he can't see his mother grinning out from behind the glass. He passes the locket chain over his head, letting it fall under his shirt. It's a cheap piece of jewelry that Izuku had given his mom for Christmas when he was six. The clasp had broken almost immediately so it could no longer open, and she had never found a photo to place inside anyway, but she always said it was her favorite.

"Lockets hold memories," she had said, when a disappointed Izuku asked why she still bothered wearing it after it broke so quickly. "This one holds all my memories of you."

"It doesn't even open."

"If it can't open, then nothing can ever escape. It's perfect."

For four years, Izuku had rarely seen her without it, only when she was going to work or just returning. She always left it on the table when she had to leave because she didn't want it to get broken in any of the chaos that could sometimes descend on the hospital.

Yesterday, she had left it on the table and gone to work as usual, and she had gotten broken in the chaos, instead.

"Do you have everything you need?" Kurogiri asks as Izuku leaves the bedroom. Izuku nods.

"Are you sure? We won't be returning here."

Izuku hesitates, looking over the small apartment that is the only home he has ever known. Yesterday he left for school in the morning,

and today he will leave for good. No more scuffs from Katsuki's shoes on the door, no more height marks ticked into door frames, no more drafty windows in the winter or neighbors who were always looking for a lost cat that was just sleeping under some furniture.

"I'm sure," Izuku lies. "What time is our flight?"

"Ah, right. We won't be going to the airport, actually."

"What? Why not? You said you were sent here by my dad. Aren't you supposed to take me to him?"

"And I will. I simply have more convenient modes of transportation."

On cue, the air next to Kurogiri bends, a dark mist spiralling out of a single point and expanding until it is the approximate size of a doorway. Izuku squints at the sudden pain in his head staring at it, his own quirk providing an overwhelming mix of incomprehensible feedback at the sight.

"After you," Kurogiri says, sweeping his arm out.

Izuku shakes his head, backing up half a step. Despite the deception associated with Kurogiri's presence, Izuku has not cared enough to resist or rail against the odd circumstances, but this? He doesn't like this, doesn't like not knowing what that swirling mass of darkness is or what it will do to him.

Kurogiri sighs and makes a small gesture with his hand that causes the ground to fall away from Izuku's feet. Izuku doesn't even have time to shout.

Four days ago, Sensei had come to the bar, and it hadn't been for Tomura. Sensei had walked past Tomura like he wasn't even there, sitting heavily on a stool in front of Kurogiri and tapping his fingers on the bar in a harsh, staccato rhythm.

"Kurogiri, prepare a room. Inko has gotten it into her mind to remove my son from Japan. He will be joining us sooner than anticipated."

Tomura sat in his corner booth, handheld game forgotten as a gameover message flashed across the screen. He had been living as

Sensei's ward for a decade now, and while he didn't see the man in person all that often, he knew Sensei trusted and cared for him. But he had never heard of an Inko, and he had no idea that Sensei had a son.

"And the mother?" Kurogiri asked, equally oblivious to Tomura's presence, even as Tomura threw his game down loudly on the table to scratch at his neck.

"She won't be an issue. Just the one room." Sensei paused for a moment, seeming to think, though he could be hard to read with his head encased in metal.

"Actually," he added, "is my old room still open?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good. I think I'll be staying a while. Best to be here while Izuku settles in."

"You're staying?" Tomura couldn't help but ask, drawing both adults' attention.

"Oh. Tomura." Tomura's skin crawled at the casual, almost disinterested way Sensei said his name, nothing like the way he lingered over the syllables of *I-zu-ku* . "Yes, I suppose so. Once Izuku arrives, I'll want to make sure he adjusts well to the change."

Izuku, Tomura thought, must be the son. It wasn't a very impressive name, if you ask him. Sensei must not have chosen it, because it wasn't half as good as Tomura's.

Izuku, Tomura thinks now, is not very impressive to look at, either. Days of turning the name over in his head has made the thought bitter, a disdain that leaks from Tomura's eyes as he glares at the pathetic mess on the floor.

Kurogiri had dropped Izuku into the bar just seconds ago. He had stumbled backwards through a portal, off balance, and immediately fell on his ass, now sitting on the floor, blinking dumbly. Tears are already building in the corners of his disgustingly wide and saccharine eyes, even though nothing has even *happened* to him yet.

Tomura doesn't bother holding back his scoff and no one even scolds him for it. Normally Kurogiri, as uptight as he is, would sigh and remind Tomura to mind his manners, and then Sensei, if he was there, would say that Tomura should vocalize his discontent in whatever

way he sees fit, so long as he pairs his words with actions, because that's how change begins. Neither adult acknowledges Tomura now, both too occupied with the new nuisance taking up space in their bar, looking seconds away from some kind of meltdown.

The last four days have been all about *Izuku* and preparing for *Izuku's* arrival, and Tomura just can't understand it. Sensei already has him - why would he need another kid, especially one as lame as this brat who looks like some kind of fluffy baby animal and can't seem to string two words together? He's *unnecessary* is what he is, and Tomura has said as much, but no one has listened to him.

Well, perhaps Tomura has just been going about it wrong. Sensei has always made it clear that it's good for Tomura to hate things, but also that doing nothing with that hatred is wasteful. If something upsets him, he's supposed to do something about it.

As small and weak as he is, Tomura supposes that *Izuku* should be easy enough to destroy.

Izuku crashes to the polished wood floor of an unknown place, blind to the details of his surroundings as a film of tears covers his vision, preventing him from adjusting to the dim light of this new place. There's a scoff to the side and he turns towards it. Blurrily, Izuku can see someone, and he blinks hard to bring the figure into focus.

A boy, older than Izuku but most likely only by four or five years, sits in one of several booths along the near wall, one leg drawn up onto the seat and the other stretched out in front of him. He is dressed in all black and his hair is a pale robin's egg blue, hanging over his face in limp strands. He scowls, the anger in his red eyes so familiar that Izuku can briefly smell burning sugar and singed skin.

The boy stands and closes the distance between them in only a few steps, stretching a hand down to Izuku and wiggling his fingers slightly in invitation. For a moment, Izuku just stares, taken aback by the helpful gesture that clashes with the boy's hostile demeanor, but then, tentatively, he reaches up to take it.

"Tomura Shigaraki," Kurogiri's voice interrupts, filled with warning, and Izuku's hand flinches backwards as the boy's eyes flash.

The boy, presumably Tomura Shigaraki, lunges forwards, latching onto Izuku's wrist and pulling him up. Beneath his fingers, the sleeve of Izuku's jacket starts to flake and crack apart, drifting to the floor as dust. It takes only seconds - during which Izuku can do nothing but stare, dumbfounded - for that thin barrier to be gone, and then Shigaraki is touching his skin and Izuku's wrist lights up with pain so intense that Izuku's vision goes entirely white for a moment.

"Don't, Kurogiri," Izuku distantly hears someone say over the sound of his own gasps. "Give him a moment."

Izuku claws at the hand around his wrist and Shigaraki's quirk, the same one eating away at Izuku's skin, rushes to Izuku easily, almost eagerly. With Shigaraki's fingers clenched tight in raw flesh, the pain doesn't abate, but the destruction halts. And then Shigaraki is the one screaming, as Izuku's fingers around his wrist slowly carve grooves of decay into his skin, blood and ash mixing together into a thick grey-red paste.

It's a five-finger activation quirk, Izuku realizes as he releases his grip, allowing Shigaraki to hunch around his damaged appendage. Izuku takes a step back, but he is trembling so hard that he immediately falls to the floor again, scrambling away from a hissing Shigaraki as the boy recovers enough to glare at Izuku with so much malice that he's sure even Katsuki would be cowed. Stools clatter around Izuku as he backs into them, knocking them aside as he presses himself against the bar. Beneath Izuku's hands, pristine floorboards rot into powder.

"You little brat," Shigaraki spits. He takes a swaying step forward, menacing.

"Excellent," a familiar voice says, deep and slightly raspy, as a stool to Izuku's left screeches harshly across the floor. Shigaraki halts his approach.

A man stands there, dressed in the same suit as Kurogiri, adjusting the sleeves of his jacket as he looks down at Izuku. The man does not have a face. His head is wrapped in an intimidating contraption of black metal that Izuku can't quite make sense of and can't seem to force himself to look at for more than a split second, his eyes continuously sliding away to the man's collar or shoulder instead.

"I suspected you were like me when I saw what you did to that villain, but this confirms it," the man says.

"You know about the sludge villain." It is a statement, not a question.

Somehow, this man knows what Izuku did. It is everything his mother feared. Briefly, Izuku is glad his mother isn't alive to see this moment, and then he feels sick at the thought.

"Of course I do, my boy," the man replies. "What kind of father would I be if I didn't?"

The man with no face is Izuku's father.

This is not a revelation. The knowledge had settled inside Izuku, a cold knot of certainty in his stomach, from the moment he saw him.

This man, like Kurogiri, doesn't have the fire breathing quirk that Izuku expected. Or maybe he does, somewhere among the seemingly endless number of foreign quirks he has stored inside of him, filed away in neat little rows that Izuku can only get half a read on.

Dread coils and surges around Izuku's ribs at the idea that he is anything like this man, whose mere presence makes Izuku feel like he is suffocating, but they are undeniably the same.

"Now," the man, Hisashi, Izuku's father says, "I am very proud of you for protecting yourself, of course, but could you please give your brother his quirk back? He won't attack you again."

"Brother?" Izuku asks numbly.

"Ah, yes, I suppose the two of you haven't been introduced properly. Forgive his manners; he's a passionate boy. Tomura!"

Shigaraki is called forward with a gesture, scratching compulsively at his neck, leaving angry red lines in the wake of his nails. Izuku's father places one hand on the boy's shoulder and stretches the other down to help Izuku up. Unthinking, Izuku takes it with all five fingers, but his father doesn't so much as flinch as he pulls Izuku to his feet. When he releases his grip, blood clots as the wound Izuku just caused begins healing immediately.

"Tomura, this is Izuku. Izuku, this is Tomura. I adopted Tomura shortly before you were born. Leaving you was not something I did lightly, but Tomura had no one and you had your mother. I'm sure you understand. The two of you will get along quite nicely, I think."

From either side of Izuku's father, the boys stare at one another, and Shigaraki's unwavering glare made Izuku doubt the veracity of that claim.

“Now, the quirk. You *can* return it, I presume?”

Izuku nods, slowly reaching across the space separating him from Shigaraki, cautious and telegraphed, like the way he would approach a stray dog that may be prone to bite.

“I n-need to touch you,” Izuku explains when Shigaraki only narrows his eyes suspiciously. Izuku is careful to keep his pinky raised when Shigaraki’s hand meets his.

“Does it always take this long?” his father asks after a moment, still looming between them.

“It - It’s harder. To give them b-back.”

“Interesting.”

Shigaraki’s quirk, in particular, is resisting. Izuku has only taken quirks a handful of times, all of them accidental, and the only quirk he has repeated, deliberate experience with is attraction of small objects. After enough practice with his mother, returning her quirk had been easy. Returning strangers' quirks, the few times he had an accident, was slightly harder, but still significantly easier than that very first, disastrous time with Katsuki. Generally, it was hard for Izuku to repel quirks away from himself when his quirk naturally wanted to attract them, but the quirks he stole were overall eager to return to their owners, to the place where they rightfully belonged.

Shigaraki’s quirk is not like that. It resists Izuku every step of the way, for nearly a minute, before Izuku manages to fully separate it from himself, more exhausted than his quirk has made him in years. His father catches him by the shoulder as he slumps. Immediately, Shigaraki grabs a glass from the bar, smirking viciously as it turns to dust between his fingers.

Humming, Izuku’s father lifts Izuku’s damaged wrist, turning it over gently as he inspects the wound.

“I can stop the bleeding,” he says, “but you’ll still need to be bandaged. Kurogiri, see to their wounds and then get Izuku set up in his room for me, would you? It’s been a rather tiring day and I’m sure he would appreciate some rest before dinner. Izuku, if there’s anything you need or want, feel free to write it down and Kurogiri will retrieve it for you on his next trip out.”

“Of course, Sir,” Kurogiri says. Izuku looks to the side of the room

where the man had been lingering out of the way as Izuku and Shigaraki clashed, seeing an entirely different person than the man who had taken him from the Bakugo's home that morning. Kurogiri's height is the same, but now his form is composed of the same black mist as the portal he opened in Izuku's living room, with wisps of purple around the edges and glowing yellow eyes. Whatever had been making the man look like Izuku's father must have worn off or been removed, leaving behind the deep, unfathomable smoke that either made up or engulfed Kurogiri's real body.

While Izuku is distracted, his father covers the entirety of Izuku's wound with one large hand, making an absent-minded sound of apology when Izuku chokes down a yelp of pain at the contact. When he pulls his hand away, the wound is clotted over with a semi-gelatinous scab, not precisely healed and certainly still delicate, but sealed enough that Izuku is no longer losing blood. He does the same for Shigaraki, before ruffling both boys' hair and disappearing through a door at the back of the room.

Kurogiri seats both Izuku and Shigaraki on a stool, keeping several feet between the two of them while he digs behind the bar for a first aid kit. He wraps their wrists quickly but gently as Izuku lists against the bar top, exhaustion washing over him in waves.

Afterwards, Kurogiri leads Izuku to a room, slightly bigger than his old bedroom, but completely empty aside from a desk and the bed, which is made up with neutral blue bedspread. The room has no windows.

"It's quite boring right now," Kurogiri says, "but this way you can decorate it to your preference. I can get you anything you'd like, within reason. The bathroom is just down the hall. Dinner will be ready in a few hours, but I'll retrieve you when it is, so feel free to rest in the meantime." Kurogiri leaves the room, but lingers in the door for a moment, staring in with inscrutable yellow eyes.

"Welcome home, Izuku Shigaraki."

Shigaraki must be his father's name, Izuku realizes. Or at least his favored pseudonym. Izuku had always thought that his father's family name was Akatani, but he was learning all kinds of ways he had been wrong today.

A false name was nothing compared to the secret of his father's quirk, nothing compared to all the quirks he had stored away, nothing

compared to the haunting knowledge of how he must have gotten those quirks. Izuku is afraid to assume too much, mostly because he is afraid to think about what this means for him, but he can't deny that those quirks must have come from somewhere.

Izuku lays in his new bed that smells of foreign laundry detergent and tries not to think too hard about things like what his father has done or whether Tomura Shigaraki will try to kill him again or if his mother is watching from some place beyond and crying for him.

Sleep does not come easily, but inevitably, it does come.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
Character death: Inko. NOT described, only mentioned. Still sad. Sorry :((((
Dissociation
Mild violence (Tomura attacks Izuku)

AFO: I am an amazing parent. I love my children Izuku and -
AFO: *checks smudged writing on hand*
AFO: Taiyaki.

Commenters: Inko is such a good mom
Me, sweating nervously: Haha, yeah, she's a real angel

Next Chapter: All for One - Part II
Complete, update: 11/9/21

All for One - Part II

Chapter Notes

CWs - end notes - you know the drill

I cut so much out of this chapter and it still ended up over 14k. Apparently, I could have written a whole separate book about Izuku's time with his father and the complicated relationships between Izuku, Tomura, Kurogiri, and AFO. Unfortunately, that's not the story I'm here to tell, so this will have to do.

On another note, anyone have any ideas for what to call Izuku's quirk?? Cuz not gonna lie, I'm kind of coming up empty.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hisashi is a patient man, and he is grateful for that trait as he watches his son peer around corners of his new home like a skittish animal. The boy's life is changing in several very dramatic ways all at once and Hisashi cannot begrudge him the need to take time to adjust. Though he is admittedly eager to begin training Izuku, Hisashi has lived a long life and is willing to wait a relatively short time in comparison to ensure that his son's integration is as successful as it can be.

Hisashi does everything he can to make Izuku's life comfortable. The boy doesn't ask for much, so Hisashi goes out of his way to provide anything he can think of - toys, games, books, a laptop, a television, even plenty of hero merchandise based on Kurogiri's reports of the boy's room in his mother's home. He encourages Tomura and Izuku to bond, and Tomura makes no further attempts to harm his brother, which Hisashi considers a success.

The family of three - four, if you count Kurogiri, which Hisashi doesn't particularly - eat every meal together and Hisashi tolerates the inane conversation to gather every bit of information about his son that he can. He needs to know who Izuku is to get an idea of how to best shape him into who he will become. Now, the boy is reserved and anxious, and far too sweet for what Hisashi has in mind for him, but there is an obvious intelligence about him that has a great deal of potential. Intelligence like that rarely pairs long with happiness. It picks apart problems endlessly, it demands change and it festers into discontent when society resists that change. Discontent is something

Hisashi can use.

It takes a week for Izuku to grow comfortable enough to start asking questions, and Hisashi is thrilled at the progress, even as he carefully debates his answers to not give too much away too quickly. Progress has been made, but it can still easily be undone.

“We’re not in America, are we?” is the first question Izuku poses.

“No, we are not,” Hisashi confirms. He supposes this became obvious rather quickly once he gave Izuku access to the news.

For each question asked and answered without rebuke, his son grows more bold.

“Who are you?”

“I’m your father.”

“Who are you to everyone else?”

Hisashi gives the question due consideration. Izuku waits patiently through his silence, watching with guarded, but no longer fearful, eyes.

“Well, that depends on who you ask. To you and Tomura I am a father and a teacher. Once, I was Hisashi Shigaraki, but very few still know me that way. To most, I am a ghost, a legend. Those who know better call me All for One.”

The words mean very little to Izuku, but he seems satisfied by the answer nonetheless.

“You’re a villain, aren’t you?”

Hisashi smiles, “Everyone is the villain in someone’s story.”

This answer is less satisfactory.

For several days after, Izuku is like a ghost in the house, sticking to the shadows and fleeing the presence of his housemates as quickly as he can after meals, and Hisashi fears he has mistepped. Then, the boy is back at his side, quiet as ever but solid and determined.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“That’s the last thing I want, I assure you. I’m not the villain in *your*

story, Izuku."

"I want to be a hero," the boy tells him, words spilling out in challenge even as his hands fist nervously in his shirt.

"You're capable of so much more."

Izuku's eyes burn with discontent and Hisashi knows that it is finally time.

He waits two days before calling Izuku into his office. The boy sits in a chair that is far too large for him, shrinking into it as his fingers twist and tangle together, but his eyes shine with defiance. For now, that spirit is aimed at Hisashi, but Izuku is young and, given time, it will be a relatively simple task to point him towards a more appropriate target.

"Tell me about your quirk."

The spark in Izuku's eyes is snuffed out in an instant, but Hisashi doesn't let it worry him. With the match struck, the fire will never be banked for long. They have avoided this conversation long enough and at this point, putting it off any longer would be a roadblock to their continued progress.

"Why?" his son asks. "I don't use it."

"Why not?"

Izuku's brow creases in confusion. "It's bad. Using it hurts people."

"But not using it hurts you, doesn't it? Your quirk is a part of you. Suppressing it like this isn't healthy, you know."

"It's fine. It's safer this way, for everyone."

"Safer? You have far too many scars for a boy your age, I'm assuming from your peers. They think that you're quirkless, correct? And target you because of that? Why should they be allowed to use their quirks on you but you can't use your own in defense? Wouldn't that be safer?"

Izuku shakes his head with the blind determination of a child. "Not for them."

"But what about you?"

“Me?” Izuku asks, as if the concept is foreign.

“Yes, you. What about your safety? Your well-being? This isn’t a trick question, my boy. I’m not trying to upset you. But why is hurting people okay only when *you* are the one being hurt?”

“It's not… *okay,"* he says, doubtfully, like he knows it should be true but can't make sense of the context.

"But it’s acceptable?”

“My quirk is bad. If I use it, then I’m bad.” Stated factual, the result of repetition, not truth.

“Quirks aren’t good or bad,” Hisashi corrects, just as matter-of-fact. “They just are.”

“Things that hurt people are bad.”

“Is an earthquake bad? A hurricane? They can be tragic, perhaps, but they are natural things. Your quirk, Izuku, is like a force of nature.”

“But I don’t want to be an earthquake,” the boy says, small and lost.

“No, you want to be a hero, don’t you?” Hisashi finds the loose thread and pulls. “You can’t be afraid of your quirk if you want to be a hero, you know. Heroes aren’t supposed to be afraid of anything.”

Izuku hesitates, staring over Hisashi’s shoulder with wet eyes and picking at his cuticles. He looks far younger than he is, with his hands close to his chest and his knees pressed together, feet hovering off the floor.

“How can I stop being afraid?” he asks, so softly that Hisashi wouldn’t have heard it, if not for the number of sensory enhancement quirks he has picked up over the years.

“I can help with that,” Hisashi assures his son, “you just need to trust me.”

And so, Izuku’s training begins. At this point, the boy knows very little about how his own quirk functions, but with time they can fill the gaps in his knowledge together.

Hisashi had planned to give Izuku a small handful of quirks to start with, to acclimate him to having and using more than one without the need for the boy to take them himself, but he finds he cannot. There is

something incompatible in their quirks, like magnetism - they are the same, but repel each other because of that. It's an inconvenience, if a minor one, but Hisashi finds himself charmed by it, fascinated by the increasing complexity of the boy who shares half his DNA.

Instead, Hisashi shuffles his mental schedule around slightly to prepare to introduce Izuku to the warehouse sooner than originally intended. The transition will be more jarring this way, so Hisashi spends the intervening week and a half before their visit slowly coaxing Izuku into some semblance of comfort with his quirk. Tomura proves to be a perfect tool for this - a textbook example of a destructive quirk, with destructive desires to match, yet Izuku refuses to condemn his brother, insisting that the older boy isn't bad, despite feeling an obvious degree of fear towards him. It is easy for Hisashi to turn the logic around on his son.

When the time to visit the warehouse comes, Hisashi is reasonably confident that the trip will be productive. He is wrong.

Izuku's first reaction to the unconscious woman on the table is confusion, a vague discomfort that he sets aside rather easily in the presence of a trusted adult. The woman is set aside in an otherwise empty room that Kurogiri teleports Hisashi and Izuku to directly. Normally, Hisashi wouldn't clear a space like this for a single subject, but Izuku is still in the very beginning stages of his metamorphosis, and Hisashi fully intends to keep the boy sheltered from some of the more distressing aspects of his work.

So, the woman is alone and asleep when Hisashi instructs Izuku to take her quirk.

The trust his son has in him, the trust that he has so carefully cultivated, shatters in an instant, as sudden and unexpected as a bullet through a champagne glass.

The boy is shaking and babbling in horror as Hisashi curses himself internally, pressing twice on the small button in his pocket that alerts Kurogiri to retrieve them immediately. Izuku's panic does not subside in the bar, and Tomura, drawn to the commotion, watches with mixed irritation and amusement. Resigned, Hisashi presses a hand over his son's eyes, and the boy falls limp in his arms, unconscious in an instant.

Tomura approaches them, feigning lazy disinterest, and reaches for Izuku's head with a hand that Hisashi bats away. Tomura smiles,

sharp and impish, reaching forward again but pulling back before Hisashi can swat him, lifting both hands in a mock-peaceful gesture.

If Hisashi still had his eyes, he would be rolling them, but settles instead for simply saying, “Stop threatening to decay your brother.”

“What’s his problem, anyway?”

“He had an … adverse reaction to the warehouse.”

Tomura makes an understanding noise. “Did you show him the labs?”

“No. But I underestimated the extent of his issues with his quirk. I thought the last few weeks had opened his mind to the possibility of using it, but he didn’t respond well to the reality.”

“Really? That’s it? The way he was glitching when I came in, I thought you had killed his mother or something. Again.”

“Tomura,” Hisashi warns. The boy snickers, unrepentant.

“Seriously, though. He’s such a little baby. I don’t know why you even bother.”

“Many would ask why I bothered with you," Hisashi points out, sharply. "I see potential in him. He’s my son. No doubt, he’s capable of greatness, but he needs guidance on his path.”

“Lame. When’s he gonna wake up, anyway? I’m supposed to beat his ass at Mario Kart tonight.”

“The quirk will wear off in an hour. You’ll still be able to play your games.”

“Sick,” Tomura says and then leaves without so much as a goodbye, probably to shut himself into his room until dinner.

Hisashi sighs again. He may be nearly immortal, but he’s fairly certain that parenting is taking years off of his life.

The next week makes Hisashi all the more certain of that assessment. All the progress he has made with Izuku is lost, and the boy is being as skittish as he was when Kurogiri first brought him home. He leaves his room only when Hisashi demands his presence, and spends the entirety of the time they are together staring with wide, watchful eyes, like he expects to be accosted the moment he lets his guard slip.

Nothing changes as the days go on. Before, as anxious as Izuku was, he grew visibly more comfortable every day. In the days leading up to the ill-fated trip to the warehouse, he seemed to almost enjoy Hisashi's company. Now, every day is the same. Izuku watches silently, refusing to engage in conversation with Hisashi, and only interacting with Tomura or Kurogiri when they are alone.

Hisashi moved too quickly. He knows that now, too late. He will not make the same mistake twice. He will go slowly this time.

He brings Izuku back to the warehouse, to the same room, though it is empty this time. They stay there for an hour, doing nothing in particular. Hisashi fills the silence with regular conversation, like any they would have over dinner, and he knows Izuku is listening even if the boy does not reply.

They go back every week, until Izuku stops looking like a hunted animal the moment they step foot into the room, even if his wariness never completely abates.

Then, one day, there is a man in there with them, unconscious on a table, same as before.

"No," Izuku says, the first words he has spoken directly to Hisashi in ages. "No, I won't do it. I don't care, I won't, I just won't -"

"Calm down, my boy," Hisashi soothes, and Izuku quiets his rambling, though his eyes stay wild. "You don't have to do anything. We just have some company today, is all. Ignore him." And Hisashi pretends they are alone for the rest of the hour.

There is another person the next week. And the next. And then, when Izuku grows used to the extra body in the room, when his eyes hardly flicker from Hisashi to the subject at all during the course of their stay, Hisashi escalates again.

That week, he takes the subject's quirk himself. He approaches the body in the room for the first time, ignoring the way Izuku tenses, and places his hand on the man's forehead. In fifteen seconds, the quirk is his. It is nothing impressive - a lung capacity quirk that allowed him to hold his breath for extended periods of time and blow large breaths of air with greater than average but overall uninspiring amounts of force.

It is not a dramatic affair. Most people wouldn't have even known what happened, but Izuku shudders violently as Hisashi tears the

quirk free, as if he can sense it. It's a fascinating idea that only makes Hisashi want to explore the workings of his son's quirk more, but he will maintain his patience, despite the temptation to plow ahead, the temptation to simply break the boy beneath his will instead of bend him.

"Don't worry," Hisashi tells his son, whose wide eyes don't waver from the man on the table. "He's just fine."

"You took his quirk."

"I did."

"How can you say he's fine, then?"

"It's not as if he was using it. He'll hardly notice it's gone."

"That doesn't make it better," Izuku says, voice low, glaring eyes shaded by his hair.

Hisashi sighs. "I disagree. Izuku, quirks are tools - true or false?" The boy startles at the non sequitur, anger draining into uncertainty.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just humor me, please."

Izuku is quiet for a long moment before saying, "True."

"Let's say you were trying to demolish a house and build a new one, a better one. That's a big project and it requires many tools. If someone else has them and isn't using them, why shouldn't you, who needs them, take them and put them to use?"

"They're not yours."

"They are if you take them," Hisashi says, because as far as he is concerned, it *is* as simple as that. "And if you use them better, isn't that a good thing?"

"You're using them better?" Izuku asks.

"I am building us - all of us, society as a whole - a new and better house. To do that, I need all the tools I can get. You still want to be a hero, don't you?"

Without hesitation, though confused by the connection, Izuku replies,

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“To save people.”

“The more tools you have, the more people you can save.”

Izuku looks conflicted when they return to the bar that day, and Hisashi is hopeful that appealing to his son’s desire to be a hero might be the leverage point that he has been looking for. These hopes persist even when Izuku is not willing to take the subject’s quirk the next week. They wane slightly the next. After a month, they are replaced with frustration.

Hisashi has been doing some reading - because obviously he is not as in his element when it comes to parenting as he thought - and he has come to the firm conclusion that enough is enough.

Izuku’s reluctance, at first, was understandable. He had spent the last six years internalizing hatred for his quirk, and everything in his life was changing so quickly that he was certainly overwhelmed. Patience is necessary, in a time like that, and it is important to be understanding of children when they are dealing with stress and trauma.

But there comes a time when boundaries need to be set. Children will test them, naturally, but it is the job of the parent, for the good of the child, to enforce those boundaries and set clear expectations for what is and what isn’t acceptable behavior.

Izuku’s behavior, verging from hesitance into rebellion, has not been acceptable.

“Today,” Hisashi says as they step through Kurogiri’s portal into the warehouse, “you are going to take this woman’s quirk.”

Hisashi has specifically selected today’s subject, whose quirk can briefly slow her perception of time, allowing her to pick up on small details of a situation and seemingly increase her own reflexes. It is a simple but useful quirk that will be easy to practice with and will, perhaps, finally give Izuku a hint of hope at winning any of the games he plays against Tomura.

“I won’t do it,” Izuku contradicts immediately. Hisashi frowns, despite having expected nothing else.

“We have been talking about your quirk for months. We won’t get any farther if you keep refusing to use it.”

“I don’t care. I don’t *want* to get any farther.”

“Izuku,” Hisashi says sternly, “don’t be difficult.”

“I won’t do it,” Izuku repeats, shaking his adamantly, the textbook definition of difficult. “You can’t make me.”

Hisashi sighs. “Actually, you’ll find that I can.”

Forced quirk activation is not a particularly pleasant experience, which is why Hisashi had wanted to avoid it, but Izuku needs to learn that disobedience is met with consequences.

Sharp, black appendages, shiny and hard like the carapace of a monstrous insect, sprout from Hisashi’s shoulder blades and pierce Izuku through, one in his shoulder, one under his ribs, one over his hip. The process is not half so painful as it looks, and it leaves no lasting damage, but there is some pain involved, nonetheless, and a great deal of discomfort. The strangled, gurgling noise that rises out of Izuku’s throat causes Hisashi’s lips to purse with displeasure.

Not entirely sure of the mechanics of the boy’s quirk, Hisashi lifts one of Izuku’s hands and places it one the woman’s forehead, as Hisashi would do to take a quirk himself. There is no visible sign of Izuku’s quirk, no way to tell if it is working, and Izuku is hardly in a state to say, so Hisashi counts to 30 - double what he needs to steal a quirk, to be safe - and then releases forced activation.

He catches his son as his knees give way, bundling the boy into his arms and pressing Izuku’s face to his chest. Izuku is crying, of course, desperate heaving sobs that hitch and stutter as he struggles to get enough air. He pushes at Hisashi with shaking hands that do nothing but put creases in his suit jacket, beating weakly and ineffectually at his chest. Hisashi holds his son tight, one arm a solid bar across his back and the other hand running soothingly through the boy’s hair as he hums a half-remembered melody from his own childhood. Izuku does not calm, but his hands go from pushing to pulling, grasping frantically to keep Hisashi as close as possible as he cries out months of built up stress and grief and anger.

Hisashi pets his son’s hair and lets him cry, basking in the warmth of the new quirk that he can feel settled inside the boy, the first of what is sure to be many.

Sometimes, Tomura wants very badly to take Izuku's head between his hands and squeeze until there is nothing left of the brat who invaded his life and stole away all of Sensei's attention. He wants it so badly that the desire crawls under his skin like a living thing trying to get out. Other times, when Izuku plays games with him for hours on end, Tomura is glad to have someone to enjoy things with. Before, the only emotion he shared with anyone was anger, but now he realizes why so many games come with co-op functions.

Izuku has been living with them for about a year, and now the extra controllers in Tomura's room have a purpose beyond being backups in case his temper gets out of control. He still wants Izuku gone and that will never change - because Izuku is and always will be *unnecessary* - but as long as the brat's around, Tomura might as well take advantage of some company other than Kurogiri.

Today, Tomura has a new game, one he wouldn't have been able to play a year ago because it requires at least two people. But now he has a "brother," and if Izuku is good for one thing, it's being a player two.

Except Izuku hasn't been very good at that, lately, either. He was never *good at it* , good at it - he is actually very bad at any game that isn't strategy based, which Tomura finds frustrating and smugly satisfying in turns - but he was always at least *there* . He would hold a controller when Tomura told him to and whine when Tomura didn't explain the game well enough and then Tomura would beat him over and over again until he got bored, and the entire time Izuku would go along with it, even enjoying himself, despite how pitifully he always performed.

Now, though, Izuku is tired all the time. He lays in bed or drags himself around the bar with dark circles under his eyes. He watches heroes on TV, scribbles away in his little notebooks, or stares blankly into space until Sensei comes to take him away for training.

This time, Tomura finds him in his room, sitting on his bed with his head tipped back against the wall, listening to something obnoxious on the radio.

"Let's play a game," Tomura demands, waving Izuku's designated controller over his head as he enters the room.

“Sorry, Tomura, I’m not really in the mood right now,” Izuku replies, as if Tomura had *asked* . He doesn’t turn the radio down; he doesn’t open his eyes.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Izuku adds, but he has been saying that for nearly two weeks and his mood is never different the next day. At some point, Izuku had obviously been in the “mood” to play, but apparently that had changed and Tomura has no idea when or why or how to fix it. All he knows is that it’s *stupid* and these days he wants to turn Izuku to dust even more than usual.

“It’s been ages,” Tomura gripes. “What do you have going on that’s so important, anyway? You’re not even *doing anything* , just play a game with me.”

“I’m tired.”

“I need a player two, come on.” He tosses Izuku’s controller over, but the brat makes no attempt to catch it, letting it bounce on the bedspread. His eyes are still closed. Tomura wants to gouge them from his head.

“I’m *tired* . I won’t be any good, anyway.”

“What’s your point? You’re never any good, that wasn’t an issue before. Why are you so tired, anyway?”

“Quirk training.”

“Is it really that hard?”

“It’s too easy,” Izuku whispers after a pause. Tomura barely hears him over the shouting on the radio.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Tomura asks. He wishes his own quirk training had been easy. He remembers the grit of dust coating his teeth, blood dried into the creases of his fingers and palms, and wants to break something.

“Dad says it is.”

“If Sensei says it is, then it is. Sensei knows what he’s talking about.”

Izuku frowns at the ceiling like he disagrees. This is what Tomura hates most about him. Sensei and Izuku are together all the time, going to the warehouse, talking in Sensei’s office, whatever it is they

do. Sensei dotes on his son, his *real* son. Sensei has been a good mentor to Tomura, but not a father, never a father - a painful realization that had been shoved into Tomura's face when Izuku arrived. Izuku has a father that Tomura desperately craves and he frowns at the ceiling about it, weak and morally conflicted, questioning and wondering, refusing to embrace the power he was born with.

"If you don't play this game with me," Tomura says, patience worn thin, "I'll decay all your notebooks." The threat gains him Izuku's full attention, the brat's eyes finally snapping open. The younger boy sits up, bringing his feet from their cross-legged position to the floor as he narrows his glare at Tomura.

"You will *not* ."

"I will," Tomura sing-songs, strolling lazily towards Izuku's bookshelf where volumes of notes, handwritten over the course of years, have been catalogued.

"Tomura, don't you dare," Izuku warns as Tomura reaches out a teasing hand, ghosting a single finger over the spines of the books as he smiles innocently. As Tomura pulls one from the shelf, Izuku stands and rushes over, lunging for the notebook that Tomura just holds over his head, between his thumb and pointer finger. Five years younger and about a foot shorter, Izuku has no hopes of reaching it.

Izuku crowds against him anyway, standing up on his tiptoes in a futile attempt to retrieve his possession, but Tomura easily pushes him to the side, walking casually over to Izuku's bed. He picks up the abandoned controller there, offering it to Izuku with a smirk.

"Well, if you don't want me to, you could always just suck it up and play a video game with me." Izuku scowls and crosses his arms.

"Really?" Tomura asks. "You're going to be a brat about this? Fine, if that's the way you want to play it."

One by one, he lowers his fingers down, counting them off with gravitas but Izuku only glares. Just before he can lower his pinky and turn the pages to dust, Izuku snatches the controller from his hands. For a moment, Tomura grins in victory, but the equally smug look on Izuku's face gives him pause. The controller crumbles in Izuku's hands.

"That's cheating!" Tomura squawks. "No cheat codes allowed! You

can't do that!"

"Huh, weird, because it looks like I already did."

Notebook forgotten, Tomura tackles him, and Izuku's mocking laughter turns quickly to a hiss at a particularly harsh pinch Tomura delivers to his side. Izuku always scolds Tomura for destroying his controllers, but here he is doing the exact same thing and looking so self-satisfied about it. Tomura can't stand him.

"Give it back," Tomura demands, jabbing Izuku again. "Give it back so I can use it to kill you, you little shit."

"Compelling argume-" Tomura's elbow drives the air from Izuku's retort.

"I'll show you a compelling argument," Tomura threatens, hawking back some spit and letting it dangle precariously from his lips as he leans over the boy he has pinned.

"Gross!" Izuku shrieks beneath him, squirming wildly.

"Compelling, right?"

"Keep your nasty gamer spit away from me!"

"Give me my quirk back."

"Fine! Fine, just get off me first and I will. You win, I don't want whatever nasty diseases you have."

"Rabies, probably," Tomura replies, rolling to the side and holding his hand out so Izuku can have the contact he needs to return the quirk, a somewhat familiar motion at this point.

When he first sits up, Izuku is disheveled from their wrestling and pouting petulantly from his loss. By the time he lets go of Tomura's hand, only about a minute later, weariness and malaise have taken him under again and he stares at their joined hands for a long minute even after his job has been done. Tomura wants to pull away - neither knowing or understanding what is wrong with his brother but certain that he's not emotionally qualified to deal with whatever it is - but he can't make himself move.

"At least I can actually give your's back," Izuku says solemnly. As if the words broke a trance, Tomura spastically pulls his hand away,

immediately scratching at his neck with it. Izuku watches the compulsive behavior with too-serious eyes that make Tomura feel torn between hiding his hands behind his back and digging his nails further into his skin. The radio is still going in the background, some english song that Tomura can't understand the lyrics of.

"If your life was a story, what role would my father play in it?" Izuku questions abruptly, intense and sober in a way that feels unnatural coming from the dorky little brat.

"What kind of shitty question is that?" Tomura asks in return, avoiding eye contact.

"Humor me, please? I'll play your game with you, if you do."

"Sensei found me. He saved me when no one else would. I guess that would make him the hero, huh? Ironic." Tomura's neck stings as the jagged corner of one of his nails breaks skin.

"Maybe… You know, all this training I've been doing with my dad, I've realized that it's way harder for me to give someone a quirk that wasn't originally their's to begin with. Your quirk gives me a lot of trouble, Tomura."

Tomura frowns, shifting uncomfortably. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Izuku sighs. "Nothing. Anyway, we've got a game to play, don't we? And I need a new controller."

Izuku gets up and wanders out of the room, presumably towards Tomura's, but it takes Tomura a minute to follow. He feels unsettled in an unfamiliar way as he rubs tiny pinpricks of blood away from the scratches on his neck.

Video games will help, he tells himself as he stands. That's what he came here for, after all. Video games always help.

There are two versions of Hisashi Shigaraki.

There is the Hisashi Shigaraki at home, who listens to Izuku ramble about what he has learned in his lessons with Kurogiri, who supports

any and all of Izuku's interests and desires, who loves Izuku with a gentle but unwavering warmth. This Hisashi Shigaraki is Izuku's father.

And then there is the Hisashi Shigaraki at the warehouse, who only wants to talk about quirks and the nature of their society and thinks everything else is a waste of time, who watches Izuku cry over doing horrible things with unchanging and indifferent body language, whose touch is a cold mockery of what a parent is supposed to be. This Hisashi Shigarki is All for One.

Izuku only sees All for One for an hour a week. It is too often.

Today is an All for One day, and Izuku stands, shaking in the warehouse, wishing desperately for his father. Though they visit the warehouse every week without fail, All for One does not always have a subject victim waiting. Some weeks they merely talk. Everytime Izuku steps through Kurogiri's portal into the dim concrete room that has become synonymous with suffering, Izuku hopes that it will be a talking week. Listening to All for One pick apart every flaw in their society is nauseating, mostly because Izuku can't help but recognize all the ways in which the man is correct, but it is by far the lesser evil.

Today is not a talking day, Izuku is not that lucky. After months of this, Izuku is too numb to be stung by the shattering of the small amount of hope he had managed to muster. He stares blankly at the woman on the table, glancing over to All for One, who nods back in her direction, instructions unspoken but clear.

The woman lays on her stomach, facing away from Izuku. He can't see what she looks like, the anonymity simultaneously relieving and sickening. Normally, Izuku's victims are on their backs, facing him, and he is not provided with even the vaguest shelter of dehumanization. There is no denying that these are actual real people who he is hurting, and while the knowledge gnaws away at him, he embraces the pain, welcomes the ravenous beast of guilt and shame into his chest where it can feast on his ribs and lungs and heart.

Facedown, it is easy for some pathetic, cowardly part of Izuku to pretend that this woman is not human. She is not a person, but a body - not a victim, but a subject. Bile rises in Izuku's mouth before he has even done anything. And he *will* do something. He will take the woman's quirk, like all the others, and the beast inside him will grow and it will chew even more on his insides to keep itself fed.

Small wings, moth-like in shape and color, sprout from the woman's shoulder blades, likely not large enough to support her weight in flight, but beautiful in their own right. She is face down to accommodate them. Izuku hopes - desperately, so desperately, everything he does in the warehouse is desperate - that the wings aren't a primary mutation, that they aren't directly tied to the function of her quirk.

Izuku has not taken a mutation quirk since the day he was attacked by the sludge villain and he hopes he never will again, though realistically, he has always known that it is a matter of time until All for One brings him one. All for One is endlessly curious about the details of Izuku's quirk, it's limitations, the small ways in which it differs from his own, and mutation quirks have thus far been an overlooked variable in All for One's endless stream of tests.

But Izuku can tell what her quirk is just by looking at her, he always can. He doesn't know for certain what will happen if he takes a mutation quirk, if it will always end as poorly as it did that day beneath the bridge, but today that knowledge gap will be filled, whether he likes it or not.

"Izuku," All for One prompts once Izuku has hesitated too long.

Izuku wishes he were stronger. He wishes he could push back against that stern warning, but every time he's tried, he's failed. The burn of forced quirk activation is familiar now, the phantom aches it leaves behind in place of physical marks linger in Izuku's mind for days after the fact. Even if Izuku says no, he will be speared in an instant, pincushioned like a voodoo doll and moved against his will.

Once, Izuku would have gladly chosen being hurt over hurting someone else. He can no longer make that choice. He wishes he were stronger, but has only gotten weaker.

Izuku forces himself close to the woman. He does not need to touch her to take her quirk - he doesn't even need to be in the same room to steal from her - but he owes her this much. He circles to the other side of the table, brushes long brown hair away from her face and commits it to memory, framing a mental picture of her on the wall right next to all his other crimes.

Izuku pulls on her quirk as gently as he can, but that doesn't stop her from screaming. Her face, so peaceful in repose just a second ago, scrunches up, her jaw hinges open so wide he fears the corners of her

mouth will split. She screams and writhes on the table, muscles taught and spine arching as blood runs down her sides. Her wings, so beautiful, twitch and shudder and shed powdery feathers all over her pale skin. Their edges become ragged, the place where they attach to her spine bubbles and splits, and she screams the whole time. It is a dreadful, unnatural sound in a room where Izuku has only ever heard two voices - All for One's and his own.

Izuku slams his eyes closed, though the image of the woman's suffering has already imprinted itself on his brain, and stumbles backwards until he hits the wall, sliding down against it. The screaming tapers into pants and gasps and Izuku can hear blood dripping off the table and onto the concrete floor.

Izuku gags - once, twice - swallowing convulsively, but every panicked breath he takes coats his mouth and throat in the taste and smell of iron. He bends to the side and vomits, tries to let the sourness overcome his senses because he would prefer to be lost to his own sickness than someone else's suffering.

"Can you manifest the wings?" All for One asks, in the same casual tone Izuku's father uses to ask after his school work. The quirk is in Izuku's hands, still and beautiful and tragic, like a butterfly pinned and mounted behind glass.

"No," he gasps

"Can you return it?"

" *No.* I told you this would happen. I told you my quirk doesn't work with mutation quirks."

"That was all just theory," All for One says dismissively. "Now we know for sure. It's a shame, though. Removing a mutation is always a painful process for the subject, but I've never had any difficulties manifesting the quirks myself, or placing them into others."

"Well. I guess I'm just not as strong as you are."

"Where is the quirk now, if it is not in you and it is not in the subject?"

"I'm holding it."

"And if you let go?"

Izuku hesitates. “It’ll be gone.”

“So you can destroy quirks, as well. Fascinating. You know,” All for One says, and by his tone, Izuku knows that he doesn’t *want* to know, “in many ways, you are actually stronger than me. If only you would allow yourself to be.”

“I’m strong enough already,” Izuku says, a tired argument.

“Heroes always need to get stronger,” All for One says, a tired rebuttal.

Of course, Izuku is not ten years old anymore. He knows that he will never be a hero. He killed that dream months ago. There’s no redemption waiting for him. Only more days in the warehouse, more quirks stolen, more blood spilt. On the days in between he will play video games with Tomura and have lessons with Kurogiri and love his father as if nothing is wrong.

He will never be a hero. He is the villain in his own story. Izuku is twelve years old and he has more victims than he has ever had friends.

He reaches into his pocket, fingers cold and fumbling, until he finds the alert button there. A second later, he feels the subtle change in pressure that always accompanies Kurogiri’s portals and he stands, stumbles two blind steps forward and falls into the bar without ever having opened his eyes.

“Izuku Shigaraki,” Kurogiri says, standing behind the bar where he spends most of his days, “is everything alright?”

“I’m fine,” Izuku Midoriya lies. He stands and brushes off his knees as All for One crosses through the portal behind him.

“Get some rest, my boy,” Izuku’s father says. “I know you must be tired. It will get easier with time. You did well.”

His father’s pride is a small flame that combats the cold that has settled into Izuku’s bones. It will keep him warm until the next time Izuku hurts someone, when the cold will settle in again. Izuku’s life is a constant cycle of freezing and thawing.

Nuclear winter comes after Izuku has been with his father for just over three years.

“Today we are going to the lab,” All for One says just seconds before he and Izuku leave for the warehouse. The announcement is so short notice that Izuku is still swept away in a wave of shock when the portal, already open, leads somewhere other than the room he has been visiting every week for years.

Izuku has known, of course, that the warehouse was bigger than the single room All for One always brought him to, but any curiosity he may have felt about the rest of the building was tempered by an equal part dread as to what the place might contain.

And he was right to be afraid. He was so, so right.

There are people on tables, some alive, some *not* , and some painfully familiar, their faces already catalogued in Izuku’s mental yearbook of people he has violated. And then there are the not-quite people that float in massive tubes along the walls, suspended in some sickly green substance.

Izuku has known that All for One is a villain - that his *father* is a villain - but he has only seen bare glimpses of what that actually means. He knew there was more to the warehouse, but he never imagined anything like this. This is like something out of a cartoon, a nauseating caricature of human experimentation and mad science. It’s the kind of thing that people see and say that it’s just an exaggeration, that those kinds of places don’t exist in real life, but here Izuku is, blinded by too-bright lights, the smell of chemicals searing his nose.

“These,” All for One says grandiosely, with a gesture at the tubes, “are nomu. They’re a personal project of mine. Each one has multiple quirks. Unfortunately, most people are not equipped to handle more than one, perhaps two, before their minds start to strain. In all the years I’ve been working on them, only one retained any intelligence. It’s a bit of a work in progress. Still, they’re useful tools.”

Already Izuku has a headache, just from standing in the room these few moments. So many creatures with multiple quirks all twisted together into a tangle that screams gibberish ino Izuku’s head. It is like staring at flashing lights of a million different colors, like listening to hundreds of songs layered over one another. He pulls his senses in and tries to block it out.

“Why are you showing me this?” Izuku asks, numbness settling over him to the exclusion of everything else, until the only thing he can feel is cold sinking into the marrow of his bones.

“Barring the limitations on range, we’ve thoroughly tested your ability to take quirks. Giving them seems like the logical next path to pursue. I thought you might like to aid in my experiments.”

“Like to?” Izuku echoes, hollow, like an empty room.

“Well, I would prefer it if you were able to enjoy yourself.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Everyone must do things they don’t want to, at some point or another.”

And so, for the next hour, Izuku tried to give a man a quirk. And he failed. He failed again and again, until All for One’s seemingly limitless patience began to wear thin, but there was nothing to be done. Week after week, Izuku tries and fails.

Returning quirks has always been a struggle for Izuku compared to taking them, but he has mastered the process with time and practice. Forcing a second quirk in where one does not belong is apparently beyond the limit of his abilities.

Izuku has never been so grateful to be a disappointment.

But ultimately, it does little to alleviate the weight on Izuku’s conscience. He doesn’t make any of these abominations because he can’t. But if he could, he would. It is by no virtue of his own that this crime did not get added to Izuku’s ledger.

Weeks later, Izuku, cold inside, sits at the bar. Tomura is in his room, likely playing one game or another. Izuku’s father is wherever he goes when he’s not at the bar, likely doing things Izuku doesn’t want to know about. Kurogiri is behind the bar, across from Izuku, cleaning glasses that haven’t been used, like he always is.

“Izuku Shigaraki,” Kurogiri says after enduring long minutes of silent staring.

Midoriya, Izuku corrects, only inside his head. He hasn’t said his real last name out loud since he was ten. He is nearly fourteen now.

“You’re a nomu, aren’t you?” is what Izuku says out loud. The repetitive twisting motion of Kurogiri’s cloth in a tumbler halts. The two stare at each other for a moment.

“I suppose I am,” Kurogiri replies, breaking eye contact to inspect the glass he is holding. It’s spotless. Kurogiri always keeps everything immaculate.

“You used to be someone else, then.” It’s a statement, not a question, because Izuku has seen first hand where nomu come from. He’s watched people morph into monsters. He’s seen quirks tangle together into the same kind of twisted mess that so unsettled Izuku when he first met Kurogiri.

“Not that I remember.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Izuku imagines forgetting Izuku Midoriya, imagines living as Izuku Shigaraki with no before, and he shudders. Kurogiri scrubs at some smudge that only he can see.

“Not particularly. I have my role here, and I am happy to fill it. You and Tomura need someone to care for you, after all.”

“What’s my role here?” Izuku asks impulsively. He is grateful that Kurogiri does not look up, does not pin him beneath that yellow stare, still scrubbing endlessly at the same clean glass even as they lapse into an uncomfortably long silence.

“You are your father’s son.”

“W-what if I want to be something else?”

It’s a foolish question to ask and Izuku’s chest aches hearing the words leave his mouth. As reserved and distant as Kurogiri may be, he is also kind, but Izuku holds no illusions about his loyalties. Kurogiri serves Izuku’s father and there’s little doubt that he reports anything questionable Izuku might say. Nothing should be said to Kurogiri that Izuku’s father shouldn’t know, and Izuku doesn’t particularly want his father to be aware of this question.

The hesitation doesn’t come from fear. Izuku is not afraid of his father. He does sometimes fear the things All for One may make him do, but he knows his father would never hurt him.

It’s a hesitation born of love. Because Izuku loves his father and Tomura and Kurogiri and he doesn’t want to leave them. He doesn’t want to leave them, yet simultaneously wants very badly to be anything *other* than his father’s son. He wants to be somewhere else, be *someone* else, and he loves them all so much that the wanting of anything else hurts like a betrayal.

Kurogiri turns away, placing his glass down among the rows of others just like it. They clink softly against each other as Izuku buries his face in his arms and struggles not to cry. Kurogiri stays facing the wall, picks up another glass that squeaks as it is shined. A tear drips onto the bar and Izuku wipes it up with the corner of his sleeve, not wanting to leave behind watermarks that Kurogiri will need to clean away.

Izuku has just stood, resigned to the fact that foolish questions don't justify answers when, softer than Izuku has ever heard him speak, Kurogiri says, "Then I hope, for your sake, you manage to leave this place."

The response is like a bolt of lightning, rattling Izuku's bones, making his teeth tingle and his hair stand on end. He stands for a moment, swaying as his knees decide whether or not they will continue to support him, then flees the bar as soon as he is steady enough. Kurogiri doesn't turn back to face him.

Leave, Izuku thinks, like a dirty word he only grants audience to in his dreams, as he stumbles into the doorway on his way out.

Leave, Izuku thinks, as he presses his back against the door of his bedroom. *Leave* . This time, it sounds almost like a prayer.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
All for One's A+ parenting - emotional manipulation, forced quirk training
Slight body horror - Izuku steals a mutation quirk
Vomiting
Depression - not explicitly stated, but Izuku is having a hard time
Human experimentation - nomu, not graphic

AFO: What, when Inko wants to kill for our son she's an amazing mother, but when I actually DO it, I'm a bad dad?
Kurogiri: Sir, you killed the boy's mother.
AFO: Your point? I swear, these double standards are insane.

The outline: Tomura hates Izuku and Izuku is afraid of Tomura
The fic: BrOtHeRs

Tomura: I am going to kill you
Izuku: But then who would you beat at Mario Kart?
Tomura: …Okay, you can live, but you're on thin fucking ice

Next Chapter: Erasure (f i n a l l y)
Complete, update: Nov 12
Likely part 1/???
Fair warning that I might struggle to get this one done in time. 14k was a lot to do in a week and I'm SUPPOSED to be preparing a research paper for publication, so we'll see. I'll do my best!

((Ignore past me, he doesn't know shit, I finished it))

Erasure - Part I

Chapter Notes

> No CWs this time (: Nothing to worry about ((: Everything is fine (((:
>
> I think Erasure is probably going to be three parts. If it becomes four, god help me, I am going to hurl myself off a wave-ravaged cliff and become one with the sea and you shall never hear from me again.
>
> This one is a little bit slower, but hopefully not TOO slow
>
> Also - up until now, I have been trying to reply to most/all comments, to show my appreciation. But it's a lot to keep up with and replying makes me anxious, so from now on I'll only be replying to some. I still read and love every comment I get, though!! They feed the writing machine

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hisashi knocks on Tomura's door fairly late at night, though late means very little to his ward, who keeps whatever hours he likes. Three short, polite raps against the wood and Hisashi waits, listening as Tomura pauses whatever game he was playing.

"What do you want, Kuro-" Tomura starts as he swings the door open, but he trails off when he sees Hisashi waiting.

While the boy blinks - likely surprised, since Hisashi hasn't visited his room in at least a couple of years - Hisashi inspects the room behind him. It's dark, lit by the television screen and a lamp by the bed, and tidier than Hisashi would have expected from a boy of Tomura's nature, with only some clothes scattered about the floor and a few empty drinks on the television stand.

"The brat's not here," Tomura says once he recovers.

"I know," Hisashi replies. He doesn't bother with a charming smile, sure Tomura would see right through it and not appreciate the effort. "Izuku is in his own room, hopefully sleeping, given the hour. I'm here for you, Tomura." Tomura tips his head to the side slightly, attentive, eyes shining the way they always do when Hisashi gives him his full attention.

“What do you need?”

“Are you ready to change the world, Tomura?”

“I’m ready to turn it to ash.”

“Excellent. I know just where to begin.”

Hisashi takes Tomura to his office and explains his idea, listening to the boy’s suggestions and allowing him to think that he has contributed to the development of a plan that Hisashi has been crafting for years. When they part for the night, Tomura has his instructions and a fresh hunger for action.

The boy grins, vicious and unhinged, just as Hisashi made him to be.

When Tomura is twenty years old, Sensei asks him if he’s ready to change the world.

Generally speaking, Sensei does not seek Tomura out. It is an unspoken rule that, while Sensei will check in with him when their paths cross, he will not go even remotely out of his way to gain Tomura’s company. And if that stings, Tomura just applies himself more diligently to his training, growing stronger and smarter, absorbing everything Sensei tells him. A model pupil.

Now it has all paid off and the moment that Tomura has been waiting for - has been *raised* for - is finally here. He is going to grab the single pillar their society is so foolishly built upon with all five fingers and watch as everything comes crashing down around him. All eyes will be on Tomura, and no one will ignore him or forget about him ever again.

He’ll show them.

He’s going to change the world.

It all starts and ends with All Might. That stupid, smiling face that inescapably saturates the whole of Japan, bathing the privileged in a false sense of security and mocking the oppressed with the impossible notion of salvation. Sensei has always hated All Might most of all and he is trusting Tomura to be his executioner.

Tomura won't disappoint.

He gives himself a critical once over in the mirror. He doesn't look anything like himself, but that's the point. His hair is cleaned and straightened, soft and smooth in a way he doesn't normally bother to pursue. With his bangs pinned back, his face is open, which makes him look younger and more harmless than he is. He's put makeup over the scar on his mouth and around his eyes, disguising the worst of his complexion. Already, his skin feels tight and irritated, but it's a small price to pay to achieve an unassuming appearance.

The kicker is the uniform. It's by far the worst part of the whole disguise, but also the most necessary. He looks terrible in it, he thinks. The collar presses too tight and stiff against the abrasions on his neck, the tie makes him feel like he is choking, and the blazer makes him look thin and weedy, but nonetheless, he looks like a third year UA student. With so many children in so many courses, Tomura doubts that anyone, except maybe their rat principal, could identify an individual student as an imposter.

"Wow," Izuku says as Tomura, satisfied enough with his appearance, enters the bar. "Who are you and what have you done with the NEET that's supposed to live here?"

Tomura rolls his eyes and clenches his jaw. "Shut up, brat, or I'll pull your teeth out while you sleep."

Paling slightly, Izuku grimaces and scrunches up his nose. "I think I'd wake up if you did that."

"Oh my god," Tomura groans, "shut up. Kurogiri, you'd better be ready."

The man in question nods. "Of course, Shigaraki Tomura."

A sharp look quells any further comments from the brat, allowing Tomura to step through the portal Kurogiri conjures without an accompaniment of snark. He's deposited in an alley just a couple of blocks from campus, casually walking the rest of the way as if he is just another student returning to classes after a break. He sees a handful of others in similar uniforms, walking alone or in small groups, and keeps his distance from them but an eye on them.

As anticipated, reporters swarm the front gates like flies at a carcass, voices buzzing together into a dull drone that increases in pitch as they catch sight of the two students walking a ways in front of

Tomura. They descend on the fools in an instant, asking questions that overlap into obscurity, barring All Might's name which is always clearly audible, repeated again and again. One of the students welcomes the attention, despite their companion's visible exasperation, and Tomura takes the distraction as the opportunity it is. He strolls past the group, inconspicuous, and lays a hand on the school's gate until it's nothing but rubble and a gaping hole in the wall. Once the job is done, only a matter of seconds, Tomura steps over the debris and onto UA grounds.

There are cameras everywhere, but Tomura pays them little mind. Sensei, he's sure, is taking care of those. All Tomura needs to do is find the teachers' lounge and steal a schedule, doing his best to draw minimal attention as he does. So long as he's not caught in the act, he doesn't have to worry overly much about being seen. Afterall, the plan is for everyone to know exactly who he is sooner rather than later.

The alarms begin to blare shortly after Tomura enters the building and he resists the urge to claw at his neck, suffocated as it is by fabric. Blood on his shirt collar would surely draw the wrong kind of attention. Instead, he ducks his head into his shoulders and quickens his pace, eyes skimming over the plaques next to each door to find the room he is looking for.

Those students that weren't in the cafeteria during lunchtime rush around him in variable directions, and Tomura scoffs internally at the idea that these children are supposedly the best Japan has to offer. Brightest minds, strongest wills, always pushing themselves to go above and beyond, "plus ultra" and whatever other bullshit they like to shout at the top of their lungs. Yet here they are, running around like chickens with their heads cut off at the slightest commotion. None of them even glance at Tomura, the real threat they should be running from, too absorbed by mindless panic. It's laughably pathetic.

The biggest resistance he faces finding the teachers' lounge and slipping inside is the convoluted layout of the building itself. Whatever heroes were meant to be in the room have dispersed, most likely trying to contain the media that is no doubt swarming onto campus. Tomura closes the door softly behind himself, scanning the room for what he needs.

Half of one wall is taken up by a white board, which is covered partially in some teacher shit that Tomura couldn't care less about and partially in crappy doodles and responding messages - mostly telling others not to draw on the board or to at least draw well, if they do.

There's a schedule in the top left corner of the board, pinned there by a neon pink magnet shaped like a cat head.

It's for the entire month, with the later dates mostly blank, save for the marking of large events, like "SPORTS FESTIVAL," which is scrawled in all caps across three days at the very end of the month. Tomura already knows exactly when the sports festival is, of course. Izuku insists they watch it every year, and Tomura can't deny that the event provides valuable insight on the future of the hero industry.

The current week, though, is filled out in detail. People, places, times, lessons - it's all written and presented in a perfectly organized, if cramped, format. Tomura pulls his phone out to snap a picture, immediately checking the result to make sure that everything is legible through the screen. Satisfied, he presses his alert button twice in quick succession and steps through Kurogiri's portal when it opens a second later, walking back into the bar triumphant.

In all, it takes Tomura less than ten minutes to retrieve the information he is going to use to kill the symbol of peace.

Izuku is not sure exactly what is going on, but he knows enough to be scared. He knows that Tomura infiltrated UA earlier that day, he knows Tomura returned with a smug grin on his face, and he knows that Tomura disappeared into Izuku's father's office as soon as he returned and has been in there for nearly an hour. Izuku knows that All Might supposedly began teaching at UA just days ago. Izuku knows that All for One has plans and does not hesitate to move people about like pawns. Izuku knows that Tomura would do anything All for One asked him to.

Here is the scariest thing Izuku knows: Tomura wants to change the world. That's what he says, anyway. More accurately, he wants to destroy it. Destruction is the only type of change Tomura understands.

The longer All for One and Tomura are alone behind closed doors, the more nervous Izuku gets. It happens rarely, but he has never liked when Tomura and his father speak alone. Afterwards, Tomura is always slightly more manic, his grin becomes a weapon instead of a smile, and everything he says is just a verbatim repeat of things that

All for One has said to Izuku over and over on their days in the warehouse.

Years of living together have killed any fear Izuku might have originally felt towards Tomura, but in those moments, Izuku is scared again. Though it is less a fear *of* and more a fear *for* . Fear mixed with a deep, aching sadness.

Sometimes Izuku wishes that he could be somewhere else, but it's a silly thing to wish. He is safe here, taken care of, loved. He is even happy, some days. This place, his home, may not be perfect, but there is nowhere else in the world that could be better for someone like him.

Always Izuku wishes that *Tomura* could be somewhere else. Because Tomura isn't safe, or taken care of, or loved the way he should be. Izuku doesn't think he's ever seen Tomura happy. Even when he gets close, there is always an anger inside him that never goes away.

Izuku doesn't know if there's a better place in the world for someone like Tomura. If anything, he thinks it's more likely that there's not, because he's painfully aware of the fact that people like Tomura, people who slip through the cracks, are easier to abandon than they are to save.

Izuku cannot be saved because he's not in danger, but Tomura? Tomura needs it, even if he doesn't want it. For fifteen years, Tomura has been told to be angry and now that's nearly all he is. Izuku loves his father, but Tomura deserves better than to be a pawn and an afterthought. Tomura is not quite Izuku's brother, but he occupies the same space Izuku thinks a sibling might, someone Izuku simultaneously loves dearly and can't stand, and the idea of Tomura lost and hurt and *never getting better* keeps him awake at night.

After two hours, during which Izuku grows increasingly more anxious, Tomura comes to Izuku's room. He doesn't knock, just swings the door open and waltzes in like he owns the place, throwing himself down on Izuku's bed and forcing Izuku to either move his legs or risk getting sat on. Tomura grins - the small, dangerous one that is Izuku's second least favorite.

He is still in the UA uniform, though it's in disarray now, tie and blazer both discarded somewhere, shirt untucked and several buttons undone. The makeup around his eyes has smudged away in places, revealing red skin, more flaky and irritated than usual. Likewise, his

neck is in a state, covered in a mix of raised red welts and shallow grooves that have left little red-brown splotches over his shirt collar. Izuku frowns, seeing it.

“You need to wash your face,” he says, “and clean those scratches. You’re going to get an infection. I had Kurogiri get you a new type of skin cream, did you see? It’s supposed to be soothing and the reviews were all really good, so it might help.”

“Really?” Tomura asks. “I broke into UA like two hours ago - the number one hero school in the country, where the actual number one hero is newly employed, on top of dozens of other pros - and you want to ask me about *skin cream?* ”

“Well, you clearly need some, so it seemed relevant.”

“That’s not important!”

“Yes it is!” Izuku argues, standing from the bed and dodging Tomura’s leg when the older boy kicks at him. “You have a skin condition! That’s important!”

“Not compared to changing the world, it’s not! Oh, come on, where are you going? I actually need to talk to you, you brat!”

Tomura groans as Izuku leaves the room and Izuku hears the bed squeak behind him as Tomura stands to follow. He dogs Izuku’s footsteps - with a litany of protests and constantly rolling eyes - as Izuku leads the way to the bathroom. The room is too small for both of them to move around comfortably, but Tomura obediently seats himself on the closed toilet seat while Izuku retrieves a soft cloth from one of the cabinets.

“I can do this myself, you know,” Tomura grumbles as Izuku runs the rag under some warm water.

“Maybe you can, but you’ve made it clear that you won’t.”

“Because it’s stupid and I have more important things to worry about than a rash and some scrapes.”

“What was that? Because you’re a smelly gamer manchild with no concept of self care? Got it.” Tomura scowls and Izuku slaps him in the face none too gently with the wet cloth. “Whoops. Whatever it is you need from me, you can tell me now.” Tomura squints his eyes shut, grimacing as Izuku scrubs at the skin under his eyes, but offers

no further protests.

“I need - get that cloth out of my mouth, brat - I need you to do some research for me. Hero stuff, right in your skill set.”

“Who?”

“Eraserhead and Thirteen.”

Izuku frowns. “I know about Thirteen. Primarily a rescue hero. Quirk: Black Hole. Allows them to suck in matter, namely rubble at disaster sites, and turn it to dust. The quirk itself is highly dangerous since it applies to *any* matter, not just debris, and requires Thirteen to exercise tight control at all times to avoid unwanted damage to persons or property.” Izuku clears his throat to cut off his own mumbling. “Not entirely dissimilar to Decay, actually. But I’ve never heard of Eraserhead.”

“Beats me. You’re the nerd, here. If they’re a hero, it shouldn’t be that hard to find info on them. I just need an idea of their stats.” Finished with Tomura’s face, Izuku moves on to the scratches on his neck. Despite his earlier insistence that he neither needed nor wanted Izuku’s help, Tomura bends his head slightly to the side in accommodation.

“Why?” Izuku asks. Tomura’s smile becomes dangerous again.

“We’ve got a plan, Sensei and I. I’m gonna kill All Might.”

Izuku freezes, ice rushing through his veins. Every thought flees his mind except Tomura’s words, which echo around in the sudden emptiness of his skull. Tomura was going to - he *thought* he was going to -

“Kill All Might?” Izuku repeats, weakly. “As in Japan’s number one hero? The man lauded as the symbol of peace because he’s so outrageously powerful that he single handedly decreased crime rates across the nation? That All Might?” His voice rises in pitch as he rambles, his final question breathy and embarrassingly squeaky.

“Again, *you’re* the nerd, here. I’d have thought you’d know who All Might is.” Tomura’s accompanying smile is teasing, but still too sharp, vicious, like he is baring his teeth to rip someone’s throat out.

“How do you plan to do that?”

“No one is invincible. Sensei says he’s been getting weaker lately, so it’s the perfect time to strike.”

Izuku has noticed that, too. Well, not that All Might has gotten weaker, per say, but that he has been appearing less and less frequently in the news. Diminishing strength wasn’t an unreasonable conclusion to draw from there. Izuku has been careful to not so much as hint at what he has observed during his conversations with All for One in the warehouse - All Might is a frequent subject of discussion - but the man must have noticed, anyway. All for One doesn’t have quite the knack for quirk analysis that Izuku does, but he is observant in his own right. Izuku shouldn’t be so surprised.

“Even a weaker All Might is a force to be reckoned with, Tomura,” Izuku warns.

Whatever the plan is, Izuku is sure that it’s foolish. Even if the plan is a good one, Izuku’s father telling Tomura, who took All for One’s word as gospel, that All Might is weak was a mistake. No doubt it will lead to overconfidence, and that will increase the odds that Tomura is captured or injured on top of failing his mission. And Izuku is almost certain that he *will* fail. Weaker or not, All Might will not go gentle into the night.

As if to prove Izuku’s worries, Tomura doesn’t seem concerned in the slightest as he responds, “I’ve got a secret weapon, special made, just for him.” A nomu, then. Probably strong, fast, and durable if All for One is setting it against All Might. But nomu, as powerful as they can be, are blunt instruments and not well suited to difficult jobs.

“And what do Eraserhead and Thirteen have to do with this?”

“Two days from now, UA’s class 1-A is going to be having ‘rescue training’ at some place called the USJ. Probably not Universal Studios Japan -”

“Unforseen Simulation Joint.”

“Sure, whatever you say, *nerd* . Anyway, All Might is going to be there, but so are ‘Eraserhead’ and ‘Thirteen.’” Tomura sneers around the names. “That’s what the schedule I found said, anyway. Sensei’s getting me some cannon fodder, but it’s still best to know the enemy lineup. Wouldn’t want to get wiped out before the final boss, after all.”

Tomura is grinning crookedly, wicked and playful in a way that makes

Izuku want to scream. He wants to grab Tomura by the shoulders and shake him until everything that has been planted in his head rattles loose, wants to yell in his face that *this is not a game* . They don't have multiple lives. There are no save points. They can't test different strategies until they find the one that works. They can't turn off the console when things get rough and pretend they were never going to lose.

This is real life. When people lose, they are *lost* . And they don't come back.

But Izuku can't just say that. He can't say any of that because Tomura will just get upset. So Izuku grits his teeth, swallows his words down even when they threaten to choke him, and remembers what his father is always teaching them.

The power of words comes from the person listening, not the person speaking. This makes them unreliable. True power lies in action. Everyone has a problem with something - the people who shape the world are those who *do something about it* .

And Izuku will do whatever he needs to do. This will not end poorly for them. He will not allow it.

But first, he has things to research.

"Two days, you said?" he double checks, mind already racing.

"Yep. That enough for you?"

"Of course. No games tomorrow night, though."

"Lame," Tomura draws out the word, but doesn't harp on it like he normally would.

Done tending to Tomura's neck and done talking, Izuku goes to leave the bathroom. Passing by the sink, he snatches up the bottle of medicinal skin cream and tosses it to Tomura, who tries to catch it between his wrists but fumbles it and glares as it clatters to the floor.

"Use it," Izuku orders. Tomura rolls his eyes, but bends down to pick the bottle up as Izuku leaves.

Back in his bedroom, Izuku sits at his desk with a notebook open in front of him and his laptop off to the side, several tabs of videos, articles, and forums open as he scribbles down his findings.

At the moment, he has two pages of notes on Thirteen - their quirk, their fighting style, their personality, strengths, weaknesses; the fundamentals. They are easy to get information on, and unlikely to be a problem during the attack. Certainly, they are powerful, but they have limited combat experience and are extremely hesitant to use their quirk offensively - or even defensively against another person - because of how volatile it can be. About Thirteen, he is well informed and they'll be well prepared.

He has nothing at all on Eraserhead.

No, that's not entirely true. Izuku has found two short, grainy videos of the hero in action, both taken from a distance and in the dark. The number of concrete conclusions he can draw from them is minimal. Eraserhead is an underground hero - which Izuku had suspected the moment he failed to recognize the name - and a good one at that. Problem being, that while daylight heroes tend to become better known the better they are at their jobs, underground heroes do the opposite. In the underground, the best of the best are practically ghosts to the civilian world.

Eraserhead must be *very* good.

Izuku runs a hand through his hair, tugging at it slightly as he mumbles under his breath. Fact of the matter is, the information *must* be out there somewhere. He just needs to figure out how to *find* it. He can't just leave it. It's bad enough that there's going to be twenty unidentified hero students on site, with who knows what kind of wild quirks. Izuku refuses to have an actual pro hero unaccounted for. Tomura will end up dead.

Likely, there are more videos of Eraserhead somewhere online. Even in the dead of night or earliest hours of the morning, people are always eager to record any type of scuffle they see. But if those people don't *know* that the person they are looking at is Eraserhead and don't mark the videos as such, Izuku has no way of finding them. Searching generic terms like "underground hero" will get him more results than he could ever dig through, especially with only two days. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. All Izuku has to work with is a name, and - just his luck - it's the name of a *ghost* .

Except. Except that's not actually *all* he has to work with, is it? Eraserhead is going to be helping with rescue training at the USJ in two days. Thirteen, as far as Izuku knows, is not employed by UA, but he never questioned their presence on the schedule. A rescue hero to

help with rescue training. It makes sense. And All Might - according to all the news outlets, he's supposedly teaching heroics, so it makes sense for him to be there, too. So who the hell is Eraserhead and why is an underground hero overseeing 1-A's rescue training?

Grinning with relief that he can only hope is not premature, Izuku opens a new tab on his computer and goes to UA's website. Sure enough, there's a tab for faculty and staff. Not much information is given - just headshots, names (either hero or civilian, but never both), and their job(s). It seems like a dubious security decision for such a prestigious institution to give any away information at all, but Izuku won't complain.

He recognizes fewer people than he expected, though he supposes he shouldn't be surprised, given that UA employs a fair number of civilians and not just the pro heroes that everyone loves to talk about. He scans quickly over the page, searching for anyone who resembles the vague figure from the videos. Twice he thinks maybe he's found them, but the first was listed as an administrative assistant and the second, upon further investigation, was actually based out of Tokyo and commuted occasionally to give lectures or practical demonstrations.

Then there is Aizawa Shouta. He's a tired looking man with long black hair and scruff along his chin, looking distinctly like he would rather be anywhere else than having his photo taken, including dead. He matches the figure in the videos well enough - in that all Izuku can really say for sure from those is that Eraserhead has hair that is some shade of dark and not short. Listed under his name is a combination of several positions and courses, more than is listed for most other staff members. Aizawa is, apparently, a coordinator, an advisor, the teacher of "Law and Ethics," and finally, *blessedly* , the last bullet point: "Homeroom: Class 1-A."

Eraserhead was going to be at the USJ with 1-A because he was their homeroom teacher. Aizawa Shouta is Eraserhead.

At this point, Izuku is relieved to have found anything on the man, but he still feels an amount of dread at the work he has left to do. Eraserhead's civilian name tells Izuku nothing about his quirk or fighting style and it's unlikely that there are many videos of Eraserhead in action that would be associated with "Aizawa Shouta" instead of his hero alias. Sure enough, a generic search of the name gives far too many results and no immediately useful ones.

Pulling at his lower lip with one hand, Izuku opens a new tab and types in an address that auto-completes after only a few letters for how often he visits it. The UA Sports Festival Database. It's a long shot, but also the best one Izuku has.

For Aizawa to be in the database, he'll need to have gone to UA. It's likely enough, given that most of the hero faculty at the school were also alumni, as far as Izuku could tell, but it's still far from a guarantee. And even if he *did* go to UA, the only reliable way to find him in a database that contained *thousands* of clips would be if he made it to the final event of the festival. Only the third event, the one on one matches, were catalogued with the names of the participants. Clips from other rounds were listed with the name of the event and the year, due to the large number of students involved.

What are the odds that Eraserhead, an underground hero who has almost completely escaped media and civilian attention alike, not only attended UA but also had both the skill and the *desire* to make it into the final sixteen of one of the most highly televised sporting events in the country? Slim, Izuku would be willing to bet. But it's the best lead he has, and it doesn't hurt to check, so Izuku holds his breath and pecks the characters of Aizawa's name into the search bar with crossed fingers.

Five videos pop up. All four rounds of the one on one matches *and* the final awards ceremony, all with the name "Aizawa Shouta" somewhere in the title. Izuku could cry.

It's still not ideal. The videos are from nearly fifteen years ago and the hero has no doubt changed since then. But Izuku should at least be able to figure out what his quirk is and with that additional context, he may be able to garner some additional information from the more recent clips, as poor quality as they are.

Izuku clicks on the first match. Aizawa - younger, smooth faced, and with shorter hair, but looking no more rested fifteen years ago - walks onto the field and the announcers make a big deal of the fact that he is, apparently, a member of class 1-D, the only student in general studies to make it to the final event of the festival that year. One of the filming drones flies closer to his face, showing the steely determination in the set of his jaw, his expression intense and intimidating in a way that is out of place on such a young face. His opponent enters from the other side, a blonde boy with headphones over his ears, who waves easily as the crowd cheers, and Izuku is fairly certain that that is Present Mic, even before the announcers

introduce him as Yamada Hizashi from class 1-A.

The match, once it begins, is over in less than two minutes. Yamada opens his mouth, presumably to scream, and nothing comes out. He falters, distracted by surprise as he brings a hand to his lips and mouths something inaudible. Aizawa is on him in moments, eyes red, hair floating around his face. He is brutal and efficient in his take-down and Yamada, caught off guard and likely unpracticed with such close combat, doesn't stand a chance.

At the beginning of the second match, Izuku's suspicions are confirmed by the announcers. It is careless of UA to not only broadcast their sport festivals on live television but to also actively explain the quirks of their students, but they have been doing it for decades. They call Aizawa's quirk Erasure, and apparently it allows him to temporarily erase the quirks of others, apt, given his chosen hero name.

He takes down his second and third opponents with the same unrelenting speed as the first. Even knowing his quirk, there is a moment of unbalanced surprise when they find themselves unable to use their own, and Aizawa doesn't hesitate to take advantage of that, striking hard and fast before they have a chance to recover.

In the final round, Aizawa loses. His opponent, a boy with cloud-like pale blue hair named Shirakumo Oboro, practically bounces into the ring. Like before, Aizawa activates his quirk and closes in in an instant, but Shirakumo seems more experienced with close-quarter quirkless combat than the others before him, showing clear signs of martial arts training. The two exchange a series of blocks and blows until Shirakumo slips around behind Aizawa. Eraserhead - or more accurately, the boy who will become Eraserhead - spins around, but a cloud, thick and white, forms around his head before the two students are face to face. Shirakumo disables him rather quickly, after that.

Eraserhead's quirk must be line-of-sight, then, with no lingering effects after deactivation. Shirakumo had access to his own quirk instantaneously, and he made a point to cover Aizawa's eyes for the rest of their fight.

Erasure, Izuku decides, is a fascinating quirk. He already has so many questions. Could Aizawa erase mutant type quirks? If he erased a transformation quirk while a person was in a secondary form, would they morph back or be stuck? Could people tell that their quirks had been erased when they weren't actively trying to use them? How

would it interact with a quirk like Izuku's own? Would it erase everything Izuku has stolen or a random one or only the base ability to take and give?

What would happen if he erased a quirk that was keeping someone alive?

Izuku's pencil snaps against the page of his notebook, a dark, jagged line of graphite interrupting his scrawling speculations. He closes his notebook and pushes it far away from him, looking at his laptop where the clip of the awards ceremony is paused on a shot of Aizawa with a silver medal, looking proud and defiant and in desperate need of a nap.

It is obvious from the way Aizawa fights that his quirk is just an enabler, an equalizer. His body is the weapon, and his strength and skill are hard fought and trained, not genetic blessings. But could Erasure itself be weaponized?

There is nothing wrong with asking, Izuku tells himself, bringing his feet up into his chair and wrapping shaking arms around his knees. He's just curious, and curiosity is a good thing. There is nothing wrong with having an inquisitive mind. Knowledge is power, after all. It's all just theoretical, just a thought exercise. Izuku doesn't even know if Erasure would work that way, and even if it did, it's not like he was going to *do* anything about it.

Except he is *supposed* to do things, isn't he? Thinking about something and doing nothing is a waste of potential.

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut. His head hurts, his chest hurts, he can't breathe, he can't think straight. He opens his eyes and Aizawa Shouta is still grinning victoriously on his screen.

Aizawa, he was in general education, but he didn't want to be, he wanted to be a hero, so he *did something about it* . He placed in the sports festival, nearly won, and he graduated from the hero course and became the underground hero, Eraserhead, who Izuku is gathering information on so Tomura doesn't die while he's trying to kill All Might.

Now Eraserhead might die because of Izuku and Izuku doesn't want to hurt anyone, he has never wanted to hurt anyone, and he definitely doesn't want anyone to die, but what is he meant to *do about that?*

Because there will always be more people for Izuku to hurt. There is

an endless line from week to week, faces that are never given names, quirks that are taken from their owners.

Even if the USJ goes well, what about the next thing? He's not *solving* anything but the short term problem, and the real issue, the long term one is--

Once, Izuku had tried to kill the problem his father.

No, that wasn't true. Yes it was. Izuku hadn't wanted to hurt him. He wanted it to be painless. He was just curious. He had hoped it would work.

Izuku's father relies on a combination of dozens and dozens of quirks, many of them redundant, to stay alive. Izuku had just been curious as to what would happen if he took one. That's all. So he had tried, just to see, but it hadn't worked. He can't take quirks from his father, as it turns out. Apparently, there is honor among thieves.

Izuku stands. It is late. He is tired and his eyes burn. He turns off the light, lays in bed, and stares up at the ceiling, but without any windows, the room is so pitch black that it is like he is staring at nothing at all.

Once, Izuku had tried to kill his father, and afterwards, he cried for hours because he never should have tried in the first place. This time, he does not cry. He feels cold and sick as he considers it, but he does not cry.

It's only theoretical, he tells himself.

Just a thought exercise.

UA is different from Aldera. Obviously. Katsuki would have been pretty fucking disappointed if it wasn't, considering what a shit show his middle school had been, but UA is different in ways Katsuki didn't fully anticipate.

There's the teachers, for one thing. His homeroom teacher is some kind of disgusting yellow caterpillar that metamorphosizes several times a day into some even more disgusting hobo-butterfly-bullshit.

Then his heroics teacher is literally All Might, the number one hero, the Symbol of Peace, himself. It's a pretty stark contrast. Katsuki can't help but wonder how bad that hiring decision hurt hobo-sensei's ego.

And then there's the classmates. Katsuki had *hoped* that he'd finally be able to find some actual, quality people at UA, but somehow his new "peers" are worse than his old stalkers. They're obnoxious slackers for the most part. Half of them don't know how to use their damn quirks properly and almost none of them have bothered with learning how to fight despite constantly and *loudly* proclaiming how much they want to fight villains for a living.

And finally, the classes. Man, the classes. Katsuki is torn.

The good parts are even better than he expected. The first few days set his expectations high. First with the quirk apprehension test, finally being able to let loose and give something his all. Katsuki blew it out of the water, of fucking course, no matter what the damned rankings said. Then the battle trials, led by All Might - by All *fucking* Might himself - and a chance to finally blow up something bigger than a baseball. And something that fought back.

Not that Round Face and her no-name partner really gave Katsuki much of a fight. The girl's quirk is okay, he supposes. She's one of his halfway-decent classmates when it comes to skill, but Katsuki is a force of fucking nature, thank you very much. He could have crushed them even without the asshole Glasses' so-called "help."

But the bad parts, Katsuki is learning today, are also far shittier than he expected.

Being crammed into a bus with all the extras while they ramble on about quirks or whatever other bullshit was bad enough. Katsuki had been content to sit next to Earlobes - who hadn't done anything to impress him but hadn't completely pissed him off yet, either - and mind his own business, because he actually knew how to fucking do that, unlike most of 1-A. Pikachu had to go starting fights, though. Actually, Frog Face started it, but considering that Pikachu couldn't even use his own quirk without turning into a drooling dunce, he's the one Katsuki really wants to punch.

So, yeah, Katsuki is in a bad mood and at the end of the ride, they don't even get to do anything cool. No, they're at the USJ for fucking *rescue training* .

Rescue training. It's bullshit. Not even a week of classes and already

Katsuki can't wait until third year, when they would get to take specialized courses based on the type of hero they planned to be. Some of these extras clearly need the guidance of the first few years, to figure out what they want to do and how to even use their damn quirks in the first place, but Katsuki already knows on both counts.

And he sure as shit isn't going to be any kind of *rescue hero* , that's for fucking certain.

Round Face or whoever is interested in it can knock themselves out if *rescue* is what gets them off, but Katsuki couldn't care less. Someone else, someone weaker, can worry about dragging civilians out of rubble while Katsuki takes care of the *real* problem.

He doesn't need to listen to some astronaut cosplayer lecture him on how dangerous quirks can be. His hands explode. He's well aware that he can fuck shit up if he wants to - that's kind of the *point* . They can tell him how important it is not to hurt people but it's bullshit and anyone with half a brain knows it.

Sure, Katsuki's not going to go around attacking strangers on the street - fuck off, he's not a rabid animal - but he wants to be a hero and *hurting people* , albeit villains, is literally the job description. The best heroes are strong; strong enough to hurt people, so they can protect themselves and take down the villains. *That's what strength is for.*

When a portal opens in the center of the plaza before training can even begin, it feels like the universe is agreeing with him.

Here, it says, have something to hit.

And Katsuki thinks in return, *about fucking time.*

Chapter End Notes

Calm before the storm ((((:

Also, I am aware that Thirteen canonically works at UA, but in this AU they're just a consultant, because I said so. As in, I didn't KNOW they worked at UA until after I wrote that they didn't and I didn't want to fix it.

Next chapter: Erasure - Part II
Update: Nov. 19

Tomura @ AFO: I would literally die for you
AFO: Kill for me, instead.

Izuku: So we're going to go to the USJ?
Tomura: That's the plan.
Izuku: And kill All Might?
Tomura: Yep.
Izuku: Just like that?
Tomura: Uh huh.
Izuku: Well when you put it like that, what could possibly go wrong!

Erasure - Part II

Chapter Notes

CWs in end notes!

This chapter is a little bit odd, you've been warned. I like it, but for some reason, posting it feels like abandoning a baby on the stoop of an orphanage in the dead of night.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You can’t come.”

“What do you *mean* I can’t come?!” Izuku demands, snatching back the notebook he had just handed to Tomura.

“I mean you can’t come. I’m going. You’re staying. It’s a simple concept, brat. Now give me the notes.”

Shaking his head, Izuku clutches the book defensively to his chest. “Maybe I’ll give you the notes when you give me one good reason I can’t come.”

“Sensei doesn’t want you to,” Tomura says simply, holding his hand out.

“That’s a bad reason!”

“Well, bad is in the eye of the beholder or whatever.”

“That’s not the saying and you know it.”

“Maybe so. You know what I really want to know, though? Who the hell Eraserhead is. Notes - now.”

“Say please.”

The minute narrowing of Tomura’s eyes is the only warning Izuku gets before the older boy lunges. Izuku yells, dropping to the ground to avoid Tomura’s grasping hands and curling up around the notebook. As it is, with all his limbs cocooned around the book, Tomura can’t get to it without dedicating himself to a pretty high degree of manhandling - and if he does that, he’ll have no way of being certain that he won’t accidentally touch Izuku with all five fingers. Based on

Tomura's exaggeratedly long groan, he's come to the same conclusion.

"Why do you want to go so bad, anyway?" he asks petulantly.

"Lots of reasons," Izuku responds, voice slightly muffled from where his knees are folded up by his mouth. "I want to see everyone in action, I want to analyze their quirks, I want to see if I can figure out how far my quirk awareness can stretch. Besides, it's stupid to face a raid boss alone. I'm your player two."

Tomura sighs. "Sensei doesn't want people knowing about you."

Izuku hears Tomura sit down somewhere else in the room and uncurls from his ball, rolling to sit on the floor. He tucks the notebook under his butt, just in case Tomura is trying to lure him into a false sense of security.

"No one has to know I'm there," Izuku says.

"Oh?" Tomura asks, sarcastic. "And how exactly are you going to escape the notice of the nearly two dozen people we will be attacking?"

"I have a quirk for that. No one will notice me if I don't call attention to myself."

Wallflower is one of the first quirks Izuku stole, back before he got so many that it became impractical to keep naming them all. It's one of his favorites - though he feels guilty for having favorites at all - and he frequently uses it to move around the bar without anyone noticing him when he's not in the mood for conversation.

Tomura hums. "It would be nice to have you there," he admits. "And hey, maybe you could steal a couple of quirks from those hero brats while we're at it. That would serve them right."

"No," Izuku says a touch too quickly, though Tomura doesn't seem to notice. He continues, hurrying to cover his tracks, "We don't want to call any attention back to Dad, and someone is bound to make the connection if quirks suddenly go missing."

"Too bad," Tomura reluctantly agrees. "Are you going to give me those notes, now?"

"I can come?"

“Sure, why not. You weren’t part of the plan, but Sensei never actually said you *couldn’t* . But if he gets mad I’m throwing you under the bus.” Izuku jumps up, pumping his fist in victory. “Just stay on the downlow, okay? You’re our party’s rogue. Thievery, reconnaissance, and *stealth* - that’s you.”

Izuku scoops his notebook up off the floor, passing it over to Tomura who grimaces as he holds it between his hands.

“Why is it so warm?” Tomura asks, scrunching up his nose.

“I was sitting on it.”

“And? Did you fart on it or something? Nasty.”

Izuku flusters. “No! Jesus, you’re the nasty one, shut up!”

As Tomura snickers, Izuku riffles through his pockets for some kind of projectile, coming up with only some pills of lint that just drift lazily to the ground when he tries to throw them. Izuku resorts to shoving his hands into Tomura’s face instead, but the older boy is undeterred, still laughing as he reaches for one of Izuku’s curls, tugging on it as he carefully wraps the tip around all five fingers. The hair turns to dust between his fingers that falls onto Izuku’s scalp like green dandruff.

“We’re leaving tomorrow afternoon,” Tomura tells him. “Make sure you’re ready.”

Then he leaves, possibly to make preparations of his own, but more likely to shut himself in his room and play video games while fantasizing about All Might’s death.

Alone, Izuku’s cheeks are still warm with embarrassment, but the bubble of joy and irritation that Tomura’s presence so often evokes has already popped. For a moment, it leaves him feeling small and deflated, but the empty space is quickly filled by a shame and self-loathing so large that it presses out against Izuku’s ribs until he thinks they might crack from the pressure.

Tomorrow, Izuku will accompany Tomura to the USJ, and while it’s true that he’s Tomura’s player two, that’s not why he wants to be there. It’s not like he can tell Tomura the real reason he’s interested in going, not like he can explain his fascination with Erasure and his idle but all-consuming contemplation of what he might be able to use that quirk to do. Tomura would hate Izuku if he knew that Izuku was even thinking about -- what he is thinking about. So Izuku told a lie that

was based in truth, one he knew Tomura would be happy to hear, and it had worked.

Izuku doesn't know what's going to happen at the USJ. He doesn't know what Tomura will do. Doesn't know what All Might, the other pros, or the students will do. Even Izuku's own actions, 24 hours from now, are a mystery to him.

So, Izuku does what Tomura suggested. He sits at his desk - scribbling out thoughts and theoreticals, what-ifs and how-tos, ends and means - and he tries to make sure he's ready for whatever it is he decides to do.

Here is a modified trolley problem:

You and your father stand beside a set of train tracks. As it is, the train's path is unobstructed, but there is a lever next to you that will divert it, leading it to kill hundreds of innocent and oblivious people.

Your father wants you to pull the lever. If you don't, he will either make you or he will do it himself. The only way to stop him is to push him in front of the train.

Do you push your father?

The next day, Izuku stands at Tomura's right hand. To Tomura's left is the nomu. It is a towering thing with vacant eyes and a beak-like maw filled with teeth like jagged bits of glass. Izuku can't stand to look directly at it, but he can see it's massive black form, perfectly still, out of the corner of his eye. The unnatural tangle of its quirks snares at Izuku's mind.

The crowd before them looks at the monster with mixed reactions of trepidation - which Izuku thinks is wise - and respect - which is beyond foolish. There's more "cannon fodder," as Tomura described them, than Izuku expected. Izuku doesn't know exactly where this meeting place is, since Kurogiri teleported him and Tomura directly

in, but the room is large and completely empty apart from the bodies filling it. And they do fill it - not so much that people can't easily move around, but enough that Izuku can't get an easy head count on just how many villains All for One has recruited for this mission.

The eyes of the group dart in turns between the nomu, Tomura, and Izuku himself. He hasn't activated Wallflower yet, and it's an odd feeling, having so many eyes on him like this. Even before coming to live with his father, Izuku had never particularly been the center of attention, and in the last five years he's hardly interacted with anyone outside his father, Tomura, and Kurogiri. On the rare occasion that he left the bar, he kept a low profile, frequently with Wallflower's assistance, and no one had paid him any mind.

Once, standing in the middle of a crowd, with people flowing by him on all sides like he was a rock and they were a stream, Izuku had craved to be seen.

Now, he is seen and wishes terribly to hide.

But Tomura wants to make sure everyone notices Izuku. Afterall, the attack is likely to get very chaotic very quickly. The cannon fodder exists mostly to occupy the students while Tomura gets the job done, and it wouldn't do for one of the NPCs - again, Tomura's words - to mistake Izuku for one of the other twenty fifteen year olds, the targets, that were going to be there.

Tomura himself is covered in the embrace of his severed hands. It's nothing Izuku hasn't seen before, but it never becomes any easier, watching Tomura's face disappear behind a dead hand he calls "Father." Like this, Tomura fits in with the swarm of villains gathered here, and Izuku can't imagine him playing Animal Crossing with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

This person is more Shigaraki than Tomura, a virtual stranger instead of practically a brother. It makes Izuku's chest ache.

Let's elaborate on the trolley problem:

The scenario is the same, except now there is a third person standing with you and your father next to the tracks. He is not your brother,

but also he is.

Your brother would never push your father in front of the train. Your father, on the other hand, would push your brother in an instant.

If you push your father, you save your brother as well as the hundreds of innocent people, but your brother will not see it that way. He will not thank you.

~~Do you push your father?~~

“It’s time,” Tomura announces. Even his voice is different. Soft, not sweet. Perfectly composed, not genuinely calm. He completely lacks his normal animation, blank and indifferent. It's a facade, Izuku knows, but the behavior is no more comforting for its lack of sincerity.

In front of them, Kurogiri opens a portal, the largest Izuku has ever seen, large enough for the assembled crowd to move through without condensing at all. Izuku is momentarily distracted by the sheer size of it, wondering where Kurogiri’s limit lies. Then, Tomura steps forward and Izuku’s fascination is cancelled out by his need to follow, activating Wallflower as he passes through the gloom.

They emerge next to a fountain, at the empty center plaza of a large, domed structure. There’s a variety of simulated terrains in the distance, spread out radially around them, from false cityscapes to man-made mountains. Izuku feels small as he takes it all in, smaller still as villains stalk into the space around him, dispersing through the plaza as Izuku and Tomura stay planted at the center.

Across the dome, at the top of a very long stairway, a group stares down at them, rendered indistinct by the distance. Izuku can see them moving though, even if he can’t make out the details of their features, shuffling around as they register the presence of intruders, grouping more tightly together as they realize they are in danger. Most of the figures are of similar sizes - the students - with a few outliers, but none so much larger as the form of All Might should be. Tomura seems to come to this realization as well, humming under his breath.

“Where is he?” he asks, voice so deceptively calm that it gives Izuku chills. “He was meant to be here. I brought this whole crowd, just for him, and he doesn’t even bother to show up?” Izuku can see his fingers twitching at his sides. “I wonder if he would show up if we killed some kids?”

Izuku does not want anyone to die here.

“Tomura,” he says softly and the older boy turns.

Wide red eyes meet Izuku’s through cracked fingers, pupils constricted into pinpoints. As calm as Tomura sounds - almost bored, really - Izuku knows he is seething. He has always hated when things don’t go according to plan and this plan, in particular, is important to him in ways Izuku can only barely understand.

“Wait,” Izuku tells him. “See how the situation develops. Let the cannon fodder do their jobs.” The words are bitter on Izuku’s tongue, but, at least for the moment, Tomura stays by his side, not rushing in to kill anyone or get himself killed.

Let’s elaborate on the trolley problem:

If you push your father, your brother will inevitably push you. You have hurt so many people that you probably deserve it, so that is not the moral quandary here. Your brother has just pushed you in front of a train, so you are dead, but the hundreds of innocent people and your brother are safe.

Except now your brother is alone and he’s angry and your father has always told him that when he’s angry he should do something about it, but the only thing he's ever been taught to do is hurt people. He has probably never even heard of the trolley problem because your father wouldn’t have wanted him thinking about things like saving people or the value of life, and he will definitely pull any lever that he thinks your father would have wanted him to pull, even after your father is dead. So the hundreds of people aren’t safe, after all.

And then, at some point, your brother will probably wander in front of the train himself, and you won’t be there to pull him back, so he’s not safe, either.

Everyone will be dead.

Do you push your father?

As it is, the situation develops quickly. One of the people watching from above launches themself down the stairs.

“Eraserhead,” Izuku warns Tomura, identifying the black blur in an instant, familiar with the way the hero moves after studying every clip available for hours and hours. Tomura hums his acknowledgment, watching intently as Eraserhead engages with the other villains.

“He’s fast,” Tomura mutters, rubbing his neck but not digging his nails in. “Relies on speed and precision to take his targets out quickly.” He smirks as someone gets a blow in against the hero. “Bad matchup against mutant type quirks, though. It doesn’t look like he can erase those.”

“That’s what the capture weapon is for,” Izuku points out. On cue, Eraserhead whips the scarf-like object out to snag a villain around the waist, binding their arms against their sides and flinging them away from him. “It gives him long distance versatility to make up for the shortcomings of his quirk.” Izuku studies the weapon intently now, never having been able to get a good look at it over dark and pixelated footage.

Tomura makes a disappointed noise. “It’s no fair. Strong hand-to-hand skills, long distance weaponry, and the ability to erase quirks. With those goggles of his, you can’t even tell who’s quirk he’s erasing. It makes it nearly impossible for a group to coordinate attacks properly.”

“I don’t think this group would be doing much coordination, anyway, Tomura.”

“That’s not the point. Even if they tried, they wouldn’t be able to. This is why I hate pro heroes. The masses don’t stand a chance against them.” On some level, as Izuku watches one man single handedly toss around dozens of villains - who truthfully are more on the level of petty criminals - he can’t help but agree.

By Izuku’s side, Tomura has been growing more and more agitated.

His tone is still mostly level when he speaks, contained, though his words tremble slightly and his voice occasionally cracks. But his hands, as always, give him away, crawling up to his neck and scratching at the bit of exposed skin there, worrying it raw and tearing open old scabs. Izuku will likely have to clean them again tonight, if Tomura will calm down enough to allow him.

In the distance, there is a commotion. Kurogiri has left the plaza to deal with Thirteen and the students, according to plan. It is expected that he would face some degree of resistance, but Izuku had decided that the students posed a negligible threat. Their unknown quirks are likely impressive, but Kurogiri is practically unmatched when it comes to evasion, so he's the perfect one to deal with them - doubly so, since Izuku is reasonably sure he won't try to kill them.

Which is why, when Izuku hears the commotion from the entrance, he ignores it, keeping his focus on Eraserhead's fight and Tomura's state of mind.

Then, he hears the explosion. He spins bodily to face it. He'd know that sound anywhere, even after five years, and he curses himself for not considering this sooner. Izuku is the same age as the first year UA students, and even if he has not seen Katsuki in a long time, Izuku has no doubt that the blonde - as strong, stubborn, and hard-working as he was - is attending UA, just like he always dreamed.

Unconsciously, Izuku activates one of his many sensory enhancement quirks, the range of his sight increasing and his vision sharpening until he can see what is happening at the entrance. Until he can see the faces of the students he has thus far ignored - see their fear, concern, confusion, determination.

And he can see Katsuki, dressed in black and orange with one arm encased in a grenade-shaped gauntlet that Izuku can guess the purpose of. Izuku can see the way Katsuki moves in tandem with the red-haired boy next to him. Izuku can see the familiar incandescent rage and savage glee that followed him through so much of his childhood.

Bakugou Katsuki is in the USJ. Of course he is. On the top of those stairs, Katsuki and Kurogiri are face to face. Izuku should have seen this coming.

But the simple fact of the matter is that he didn't. Izuku hasn't thought of Katsuki in years. In the beginning of his stay with his father, Izuku had thought of Katsuki whenever he met Tomura's glaring red eyes.

Every time he took a quirk, he would remember how incredibly scared Kacchan had looked that day when they were four, before the fear was swallowed by an anger that engulfed every one of their interactions. He would hear Katsuki's voice in his head each time he did something bad, calling him a villain.

But then Tomura had started smiling at Izuku, too - sharing his favorite Pokémon and teaching Izuku to play Super Smash Bros. - and his eyes had stopped looking anything like Katsuki's.

Now, Izuku has so many quirks from so many people that there's no longer a single representative for everyone he has wronged, and the temporary appropriation of Katsuki's quirk is among the most minor of Izuku's crimes.

And maybe there is still a voice in Izuku's head that scolds him whenever he does something wrong - whenever he takes a quirk or gives Tomura information or loves his father knowing full well what the man has done - but now it just sounds like his own.

Izuku had nearly forgotten about Bakugou Katsuki.

And now is not the time to remember.

Izuku swallows, squeezing his eyes shut tight to shut off the enhanced vision, forcing himself to turn his back on the fight in the distance to focus again on the one happening next to him. The scene that greets him is different from what he expected. The space next to him is empty.

In Izuku's seconds of distraction, Tomura has moved. He is already halfway across the plaza, and despite the hand covering his face, Izuku can tell that Tomura is wearing Izuku's least favorite grin. It's the smile Tomura gets whenever he is about to hurt someone - sharp and bloodthirsty, with too many teeth and wild eyes. It's the kind of smile that makes Izuku remember why he was so afraid of Tomura when they first met.

Truely, it's a travesty to call it a smile, because this is *not* what happiness looks like, and Izuku hates that Tomura can't tell the difference. Izuku would give anything to teach Tomura what a smile is meant to be. Would do anything to show him that the soft moments they spend together at the bar are far closer to fulfillment than the violence he is praised for.

Let’s elaborate on the --

… Wait. This stopped sounding like the trolley problem, at some point.

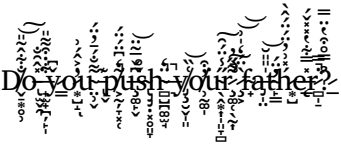
What are the trains supposed to be in this metaphor, again? They were meant to be the villains of the story, but then what’s the train that’s hitting your brother? A different villain? That doesn’t make sense. It’s gotten a bit tangled up.

Let’s try again:

Okay. The trains are the villains of the story. Then your father is a train. So are you and your brother. You are all… sentient trains.

No. This - this is already worse.

Maybe the trolley problem has been stretched too far.



With Tomura’s often childish behavior, it can be easy to forget how intelligent he is. The more his anger builds, the more irrational he will get, throwing away plans in favor of pure destruction, but when he manages to keep a level head, Tomura is capable of being surprisingly analytical and strategic. He is good at picking apart weaknesses. Izuku wishes it weren’t so.

“It’s hard to see when you keep moving around,” Tomura says as he charges forward, “but your hair floats when you use your quirk, and the moment it falls - that’s when you blink. The time between has gotten shorter and shorter. You’re reaching your limit, aren’t you?” Izuku had pointed out the tell of Eraserhead’s quirk in his notes, along with dozens of other things, but the observation of the timing is Tomura’s own. Izuku wishes, not for the first time, that Tomura could be stupid, that his intelligence hadn’t been honed into a sword.

On a level playing field, Eraserhead would certainly win any fight between him and Tomura, Izuku has no doubt. Izuku has trained with Tomura, and while the older boy doesn't completely lack combat skills, he still relies far too much on the raw destructive power of his quirk. Without it, he is built for speed, lacks power, and is fairly frail. Easy to capture or incapacitate. Izuku would know - he's done it.

But the playing field is *not* level. Izuku had seen to that, tipping the odds in Tomura's favor just enough for him to get past Eraserhead's guard. Tomura dodges around the capture weapon the hero sends after him, grasping the scarf by the end and wrapping it around his hand. It serves as a tether, reeling them both in closer as they run at each other, Eraserhead's hands fisted in his weapon, Tomura with a hand drawn back. They collide, Tomura's hand flying over Eraserhead's shoulder, his body folding over as the hero's elbow drives into his solar plexus. Izuku winces, but the sympathy he feels for Tomura is contrasted by relief.

"Don't push yourself, Eraserhead," Tomura says into the space between them. His voice, delighted and mocking, makes Izuku reassess his relief.

Eraserhead's hair falls.

Tomura's obvious grasp went wide when Eraserhead ducked in close to him, but it was a feint all along. With muted horror, Izuku seeks out Tomura's other hand, closed around Eraserhead's elbow, having caught the blow. He watches as the skin cracks like spiderwebs traveling through glass, watches as flesh turns grey and brittle and crumbles away from the wet sinew of muscle.

Eraserhead disengages before the rot reaches bone, punching Tomura in the chest with his free arm and throwing himself backwards, away from Tomura but towards half a dozen other enemies. Tomura has been knocked to the ground, but seems content to stay there for the moment, watching as Eraserhead ducks under a grab, shoulder checks one villain, rolls away from another, keeping up with the fast tempo of the fight even as his arm hangs limply at his side.

"This fight isn't at all like what you're used to, is it?" Tomura asks. "No, you're more of the surprise attack type, aren't you? Catch them off guard and take care of them quickly. A long fight against a group like this isn't your normal job at all." Hearing his own carefully recorded observations come out of Tomura's mouth makes Izuku feel ill. "Still, you ran down to face us head on, all alone. Was that to

make your students feel *safe?* " Tomura sneers around the word.

The underlings don't give Eraserhead any room to breathe, not allowing him to so much as spare Tomura a glance as the boy mocks him. He narrowly dodges the swipe of a villain with long blade-like fingers, wrapping the man up in his scarf and tugging hard to pull the villain into the path of another. A second later, Eraserhead drops the man he just used as a shield and kicks his most recent attacker across the face, sending them sprawling to the ground. He pants, shoulders heaving, but barely takes a moment to breathe before burying his hands back into his weapon and spinning to face Tomura again, quirk activated.

Tomura laughs abruptly, giddy and manic. "You're so cool… So cool!"

Izuku's hair stands on end. He wants to run away. He wants to bring Tomura with him, somewhere far from this place where they can leave the Shigaraki who riles himself up with blood and violence behind.

"By the way, hero… I'm not the final boss."

In All Might's absence, Izuku had somehow forgotten about the abomination they brought to handle the number one hero. Pitting Eraserhead against it is a joke - the kind of dark comedy that ends in death. It grabs the underground hero by his face, hand dwarfing his head. Eraserhead doesn't even have time to make a futile attempt at escape before he is being slammed down, skull slamming against hard stone, goggles snapping and flying away, blood --

Izuku slams his eyes closed.

This is not real life, he tells himself. He's not actually here. Things like this don't really happen.

"Tomura," he chokes out.

"Do you like our nomu, Eraserhead?" Tomura asks. "He's bioengineered, specifically to take down All Might. The anti-Symbol of Peace."

Tomura snickers to himself the way he does whenever he thinks he has said something especially clever. The nomu screeches, an inhuman sound that makes Izuku's teeth ache. Something makes a long, ugly splintering noise - not bones, not bones, *not bones* .

“Tomura,” Izuku says again, forcing his voice to be louder even as it tries to die in his throat. Salt invades his mouth when he speaks. He doesn’t know when he started crying.

“Not now, rogue. I’m busy.”

How can he stand it, Izuku wonders. How can he sound so pleased with himself?

“The ability to erase quirks, it’s - hmm, it’s wonderful, but not all that impressive, really,” Tomura muses to himself. “In the face of overwhelming power, you might as well be quirkless.”

Another crack, another thud, the ground trembles faintly beneath Izuku’s feet.

He wishes this could be over already, he wishes this never happened in the first place, he wishes he was somewhere else, he wishes he didn’t exist at all.

“Shigaraki Tomura,” Kurogiri says. Izuku didn’t notice his return, but he’s beyond feeling surprised. All he can feel is the weight of his bones trying to pull him into the earth and the cold of his blood as it crawls through his veins.

“Kurogiri. Did you kill Thirteen?” *Please, no.*

“I put Thirteen out of action -” *thank god* “-but there were students I was unable to disperse, and one of them was able to run away.”

“Huh? Kurogiri, you…” Izuku can hear Tomura’s building distress. On a normal day, Izuku would try to soothe him. But today is not a normal day. Today, there is blood all over the ground. Because of Tomura. Because of Izuku. He can smell it in the air.

“If you weren’t a warp gate,” Tomura growls, “I would have crushed you to pieces. Damn it. It’s game over. There’s no point in staying if they’re going to bring in reinforcements. We can’t win against dozens of pros. Man, it’s really game over. Let’s go home.”

Yes, Izuku thinks, let’s go. Please, let’s go.

But go home? Izuku’s not sure he wants to go there. Home, where they will talk about how this attack could have gone better. Home, where they will say how many people should have died. Home, where the blood they have spilt will not have been enough. Home, where

they will inevitably be made to spill more.

“But first,” Tomura continues. “We’ve come all this way. It would be a shame not to smash some of All Might’s pride as the Symbol of Peace before we go. Let’s leave some bodies for him to find.”

Izuku had withdrawn so far into himself that he had stopped paying attention. It was foolish of him, beyond foolish, but he stopped keeping track of people. And now there are two students at the edge of the water near the plaza. Two students who freed themselves from whatever mess Kurogiri dropped them in and made their way to where their teacher was fighting. Two students that had been watching for Izuku-doesn’t-know how long, because he hadn’t been paying attention. Two students that Tomura has noticed.

Two students that Tomura wants to make into bodies.

Izuku’s eyes fly open.

Time slows around him, stretching one moment into several, allowing Izuku to take in every detail of the situation between one breath and the next. Bullet time - that was what Izuku had named it. The very first quirk his father ever made him steal.

Eraserhead is facedown on the ground with the nomu on his back. There is blood pooling around his head. Two students lurk nearby in shallow water, not yet having processed the words Tomura just spoke. Tomura has already turned towards them, body leaned forward in a lunge, arm halfway raised.

No one is coming to save them. Those students cannot react quickly enough. Backup won’t arrive in the time it takes for Tomura to lay down all five of his fingers.

Here is what is going to happen:

Tomura is going to press his hand against one of the students’ faces, likely the girl who seems to have some kind of frog quirk, before they even have time to realize what is happening. She will turn to dust between his fingers. Tomura will become a murderer and he will not even care. His hands will never get the chance to be anything but deadly weapons, and everything Tomura has ever suspected or feared about himself will be proven correct.

Kurogiri will take Izuku and Tomura back to the bar, where Tomura will rail against their failure. He will make a new plan to kill All

Might. He will ask for Izuku's help, again. Izuku will give it. More people will get hurt and it will be Izuku's fault.

Izuku thinks of Eraserhead, who might die here. Of Erasure, that might die with him. He thinks of heroes and villains and how stories are written.

He thinks of Aizawa Shouta - the boy, not the hero - who looked so small in the sports festival's large arena, who was unhappy with his lot in life and *did something about it* , who stood on the podium and smiled in victorious defiance. That boy wrote his own story. That boy *made* himself the hero.

Izuku wants to be like that boy.

The trolley problem isn't working anymore, so let's simplify:

There's you, your father, and your brother, who are all varying degrees of guilty. Then there's hundreds of innocent people.

Either the innocents die, or some combination of you, your father, and your brother do.

Now let's complicate:

Because this is not a theoretical. This is not a thought exercise. This is real life. Real people will die, and you will be the one to kill them.

So.

Who do you save?

Chapter End Notes

CWs
We're starting the USJ. Canon-typical violence/injury and associated distress

Aizawa is heeeere! He is currently closer to dead than dad, but at least he has finally made an appearance. It only took... almost 40k words (man, this fic has really spiraled out of control)

Tomura @ the USJ: I'm here to cause problems on purpose

Izuku, contemplating murder: yOuR fAtHeR iS a TrAiN

Google docs: Did you mean "your father is ON a train?"
Me: stfu I said what I said

Next chapter: Erasure - Part III
Update: Nov 26

Erasure - Part III

Chapter Notes

CWs in end notes

Ho - ly - wow
The reception of the last chapter blew my absolute mind. Thank you all for the support! I'm glad you liked the trolley problem, it's my pride and joy. Fair warning that I have probably peaked. Ill-Gotten Gains is a little over a month old now, and it's already officially the longest thing I have ever written. Your comments, kudos, hits, etc are what have gotten it this far!

Speaking of length - remember when I said Erasure would be 3 parts? Yeah, well, I'm a lying liar who lies. We're probably looking at 5 parts, because there's still a lot to get through. Later today, I am going to wade dramatically into the sea (because there aren't actually any cliffs where I live from which I can throw myself) and build a new life for myself beneath the waves. If, by some god forsaken twist of fate and failing of self control, Erasure is LONGER than 5 PARTS?! Then I shall steal Poseidon's throne and lay waste to the earth :)

Also, this chapter is a little eh, but they can't all be bangers. Hopefully y'all still enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta hasn't wanted to be a hero since he was a child.

As a civilian, it's easy to *want* to be a hero, to see the appeal of saving people, to see the thrill and prestige and think it's something that could be satisfying to devote a life to. But that's not what it means to be a hero, not really. Only fools *want* to be heroes.

What it really means to be a hero is dealing with endless pain and suffering.

The people a hero saves are in pain. They are often in the middle of the worst days of their lives, and while saving them *may* put a stop to that suffering, a hero still needs to witness it, first. There is an abundance of awful things in the world, and a hero - especially an underground one - through the course of their career, is likely to see them all. This burden, though, is made lighter by the virtue of being

able to *help* . Pain paired with healing power.

But even the people a hero saves others *from* are often in pain. It is easy to say that villains are evil and pretend that they were born that way, but in reality, while many people are called villains because of the things they chose to do, just as many are born from the things that are *done to* them. And a hero's ability to help these people is limited, at best. In fact, the system often recommends that you hurt them more. Take them down by whatever means necessary, maybe give them some bruises, broken bones, or blood loss along the way. Lock them up, throw away the key. It's an inescapable part of the job, but there is no comfort in being the cause of someone's pain.

Then, of course, there is the pain of the hero, themself. The stab wounds, the gunshots, the quirk injuries. Generally, that doesn't even bear mentioning over the pain of others - that's the way of heroes - but, nevertheless, the injuries accumulate quickly. Being a hero means fighting every day, and when someone fights that often, sometimes, inevitably, they lose. And when they lose, they either get hurt or they die. Or worse - other people die.

That's the greatest pain of all. The pain of the people the hero *fails* to save. The cases - the *bodies* - gone cold. The instances where no one gets there in time, either moments or days or years too late. The instances where no one gets there at all - where no one even realizes that anything is wrong, but somewhere someone is crying out for help that they will never receive, not even post mortem. The pain of those people who die alone and scared and the pain of those who outlive them.

Shouta was sixteen years old the first time he failed to save someone and his desire to be a hero died with them. After that, it wasn't a want, but a *need* . He wasn't stupid enough to crave the darkness and suffering that shadow a hero's footsteps, but Shouta has never been able to watch bad things happen without doing something about them.

Too many people believe that someone else will take care of the problems in the world and too few people actually *do* . Maybe someone else would help, but Shouta *can* , so he *will* , even if he has already seen enough pain to last a lifetime.

And so, every day, Shouta fights.

The USJ is not his first time losing. It is, perhaps, the most painful

losing has ever been, though.

Yes, some of that is Shouta's own, physical pain. The pain of flesh flayed away from bone with only a touch. The pain of both his arms being broken, one cleanly snapped and the other twisted into countless shards. The pain of the *thing* on top of him, compressing his lungs and forcing his body flat to unforgiving concrete. The pain of having his head smashed down so many times that only tenacity and grit are keeping him conscious. It is probably the most pain Shouta has ever been in.

But worse than all of that is the scalding *inadequacy* that comes with his failure to protect his students. They are who knows where, fighting who knows what. It's Shouta's job to prepare them for threats like this, but he hasn't even had them for a week yet. They're all still so new and small and soft, full of potential but also naivety. They all still *want* to be heroes.

Eventually, every hero hopeful needs to learn the hard lesson that sometimes the heroes lose, but Shouta didn't want his first years to learn so soon and he didn't want to be the one teaching them, not like this. Not broken and helpless while a maniac rubs Shouta's weaknesses in his face.

"Tomura," someone says. Shouta can't see the speaker, but they sound like they are on the verge of panic, voice high and choked with tears. They sound young and afraid and it makes Shouta ache at his own uselessness. More pain, and it hurts all the more for not being his own, for being helpless when he is meant to be *helping* .

"Not now, rogue," Shouta's assailant dismisses callously. "I'm busy." Shouta struggles to raise his head as the man continues to mock him, but can only strain futilely against the beast's hold.

"Shigaraki Tomura," the purple one says as he swirls back into being in the plaza.

"Kurogiri. Did you kill Thirteen?" *Please, no.*

"I put Thirteen out of action -" *not dead, then* "-but there were students I was unable to disperse, and one of them was able to run away." It must have been Iida. Thank god he had the wisdom to run. With Thirteen incapacitated as well, their only hope would be backup from the school. Iida is their best chance at getting that before it's too late.

"Huh?" Shigaraki Tomura asks, voice deadly with disgusted disbelief.

“Kurogiri, you… If you weren’t a warp gate, I would have crushed you to pieces. Damn it. It’s game over. There’s no point in staying if they’re going to bring in reinforcements. We can’t win against dozens of pros. Man, it’s really game over. Let’s go home.” Shouta does not let himself hope. “But first. We’ve come all this way. It would be a shame not to smash some of All Might’s pride as the Symbol of Peace before we go. Let’s leave some bodies for him to find.”

Shouta did not let himself hope and so he is not disappointed. He is devastated, instead. What is he meant to do, pinned as he is, against a madman intent on shedding blood?

Being a hero is all about tolerating pain. That’s the thing no one ever tells you. That’s why only a fool would actually *want* to be a hero, knowing what they are asking for. With his head pressed to cracked and crattered concrete, Shouta asks himself derisively: How much can he take before he breaks? How much can he break before he falls to pieces? He is already past his limit. Already broken, already shattered across the floor.

But Shouta is a hero, not because he wants to be, but because he *needs* to be. He has felt pain and seen it and caused it - and he has not let it stop him, yet.

Which is why Shouta puts everything he has into raising his head, into locking bleary blood-filled eyes onto the blurry figure who has just launched himself towards the water, where two of Shouta’s students have found themselves. Activating his quirk makes Shouta’s entire head scream, like pieces of his skull are coming loose and stabbing into his brain - which, for all he knows, they are. Between the blood, the concussion he certainly has, and whatever other damage has no doubt been done to his face, Shouta can barely see, but it’s enough. When Shigaraki’s hand meets Asui’s face he makes an irritated noise, and while Shouta hears the girl stutter on a breath, she does not scream.

“What do you think you’re doing, rogue?” Shigaraki asks. It’s only then that Shouta notices the fourth figure - his two students in the water, Shigarki in front of them, and a boy by his side.

The boy is… small. Definitely smaller than some of Shouta’s first years, though he can’t see clearly enough to get an accurate age estimate. The figure is just a blur of green next to Shigaraki’s black. Shouta squints, careful not to let his eyes close completely, and sees that Shigaraki’s hand has actually stopped about a centimeter away

from Asui's face. The unknown boy, the one Shigaraki called "Rogue," has a hand around the man's wrist, halting his attack.

"You can't kill her, Tomura," the boy says, in the same choked, raspy voice from before. Is he crying? Shouta can't see well enough to tell.

"Pretty sure I can," Shigaraki responds flatly, but he neither pulls away nor attempts to attack the boy beside him.

"Remember why we're here. We're after All Might, not the NPCs. The more people you kill, the more this looks like senseless violence, especially if they're children."

"I'm not opposed to senseless violence."

"I'm aware. But this is a strategy game, Tomura, not a beat 'em up."

There is a tense moment of silence and Shouta struggles to keep his eyes open, struggles to even stay conscious. Somewhere, there is a crash, but Shouta couldn't tell you how far away it was or what direction it came from because the blood rushing through his ears makes everything sound distorted.

He has fought until he was broken, kept fighting until he fell to pieces, and then he picked those pieces up and weaponized them, like using shards of glass as improvised knives. He has reached his limit twice over. His limbs are heavier than the thing sitting on top of him, pain bleeds out of his edges like running ink, and rainbow static dances in all the fuzzy places in his vision.

Shouta blinks.

His eyes do not open again.

Izuku closes his fingers around Tomura's wrist a fraction of a second before he can lay his hand across the frog-quirked girl's face. Izuku's hand eclipses the scar he left on Tomura the day they met, a small handprint that perfectly pairs with the larger one on Izuku's own wrist. Izuku fears that Tomura won't stop at just a touch, but the older boy freezes as if restrained, despite how gentle Izuku's grip is. Tomura turns to face him slowly, and Izuku refuses to cower from the flames

of anger in Tomura's eyes.

"What do you think you're doing, rogue?"

Saving us all, Izuku thinks.

"You can't kill her, Tomura," Izuku says instead, doing his best to sound confident and authoritative despite how near he was to a panic attack just seconds ago. His voice is raspy and his cheeks are still wet, but his tone is steady and he is no longer crying.

"Pretty sure I can," Tomura responds, but for the moment, he is still listening, not resisting Izuku's hold.

"Remember why we're here," Izuku tries to reason. "We're after All Might, not the NPCs. The more people you kill, the more this looks like senseless violence, especially if they're children."

"I'm not opposed to senseless violence." Izuku cringes internally, but matches Tomura's impatient look with a level one.

Izuku swallows. "I'm aware. But this is a strategy game, Tomura, not a beat 'em up."

Tomura's eyes narrow. Izuku knows things could still go either way. He can reason with Tomura, some of the time, but never control him, and at the end of the day, Tomura will do what Tomura thinks is best.

Izuku considers taking Decay, forcing Tomura to do things the peaceful way by depriving him of his means of violence, but it is unlikely that Tomura would let him. After years of the quirk going back and forth, Tomura has learned to identify the subtle feeling associated with Izuku attracting the quirk away, and now, unless Izuku catches him completely off guard, Tomura can tug *back* , resulting in a battle of wills that they don't have time for in the middle of a literal battle. Izuku would be reluctant to leave Tomura without a means of defense, besides.

So Izuku and Tomura stand in an uneasy silence while Tomura makes up his mind, Izuku hoping that he can manifest his desired outcome if he stays calm and rational enough. Whichever way Tomura was leaning, Izuku never gets to find out.

The doors to the USJ blow open, dust billowing around them as they go flying and crash to the ground a short distance away. Attention

torn away from the stray students, Tomura spins, dragging Izuku with him until they are both facing the entrance. Slowly, All Might emerges from the cloud of swirling dust, his figure large and distinct even from such a distance.

“It’s fine now!” he calls, voice booming across the whole of the training arena. “I am here!” His face, Izuku can see, is set in grim lines, nothing like the smiling action figures that lined Izuku’s shelves when he was a child.

“Finally,” Tomura says. Izuku doesn’t turn to look at him, eyes fixed on All Might, but he can hear the deranged grin in the words. “You’ve kept me waiting, hero. You trash of society.”

It’s not fine, Izuku thinks, on the edge of frantic. They need to leave, right then, or Izuku has the terrible feeling that nothing is going to be fine ever again. Izuku moves from holding Tomura’s wrist to clutching his arm just above the elbow, digging his fingers in and tugging slightly. Tomura doesn’t acknowledge him.

Between them and All Might, the underlings they brought along hesitate and cower, but are rallied after a moment by a brave soul among them. None of them get to take more than half a step forward before they’re disposed of, all groaning on the ground clutching their guts within the blink of an eye. It happens so quickly Izuku doesn’t even have enough time to activate a quirk to help him keep pace.

Then, not even a moment later, Izuku is jostled, losing his grip on Tomura’s arm as he stumbles to keep his footing. The students disappear from the water behind them and reappear under All Might’s arms, along with a limp and unconscious Eraserhead, all of whom are deposited gently on the ground a short distance away.

Tomura makes a small, hurt sound, almost a whine, and Izuku rips his eyes away from All Might, his need to ensure his brother’s well-being outweighing the survival instincts that scream for him to keep sight of the threat. Tomura leans against his nomu, balancing himself with one hand while the other covers his face.

“It’s no good… It’s no good,” he mumbles fervently into his palm, his eyes wide and glassy-wet as he scans the ground.

Next to Izuku’s feet, the hand that Tomura wears over his face lays, palm up and fingers stiff. The severed hands always make Izuku faintly nauseous, but more sickening still is the way Tomura staggers towards it, kneeling down next to Izuku and picking it up almost

reverently.

“I-I’m sorry, Father,” he says, sounding close to tears. “So sorry…” He places it back over his face, exhaling a shaky breath as he does. It seems to calm him almost immediately, and he swings from this scared and almost broken type of vulnerability right back into the mania that has defined this entire exhibition so far. It’s enough to give Izuku whiplash.

“He hit us as he was saving them. It’s the violence of a government official,” Tomura says as he stands, sounding far too pleased. He hums to himself. “He’s definitely fast. I couldn’t follow him with my eyes, could you?” Izuku, realizing he’s being addressed, shakes his head. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. Still, he’s not as fast as I thought he would be. So I guess it’s true… He is getting weaker.”

Tomura smiles his horrible smile, and even though he is looking at Izuku, clearly expecting some form of encouragement, Izuku can’t find it in himself to smile back. It is taking everything he has not to start crying again. He wonders what Tomura would do if he broke down, if he begged that they go home. He is too afraid of the answer to try.

While Izuku is busy attempting to quell the burning in his eyes, All Might makes his move. The hero disappears from where he left his companions, yelling the name of one of his signature moves as he reappears in front of them and prepares to smash them out of existence. Izuku can only clench his eyes shut and brace for impact, though he’s sure that would do very little against a point-blank blow from the Symbol of Peace, but Tomura grabs him by the elbow and pulls him close, pressing their sides tight together.

“Nomu,” Tomura says, and the beast is there, taking the hit in their place. The air pressure generated is insane, causing the water behind them to well up in massive crests that crash back down with a spray that makes Izuku’s entire back damp and cold. The hulking mass of the Nomu protects Izuku and Tomura from the worst of it, but Izuku still needs to dig his heels in and wrap a fist in the side of Tomura’s shirt to avoid being knocked back a few steps.

The nomu screeches, swiping both arms in wide, clumsy arcs that All Might ducks easily beneath. All Might throws an answering punch, hitting the nomu square in the stomach. Garnering no reaction, he swings again, hitting the nomu first in one side of the head, then the other. The beast’s neck swivels with the blows, but it is otherwise unaffected, opening its mouth wide and craning its head forward to

screech in All Might's face. Izuku flinches into Tomura's side. Tomura chuckles.

"That's not going to get you anywhere," he says. "Nomu has shock absorption, so you can punch him as much as you want and it won't make any difference. If you want to damage him, your best bet would be to slowly gouge out bits of his flesh." The nomu screams again, swinging a large hand towards All Might's head. "Whether or not he'd let you do that is a different issue, though."

All Might evades this swing as easily as all the others. For a moment, his eyes dart away from his opponent and to Tomura, sizing him up. Izuku holds his breath, does his best to be invisible, and hopes All Might won't notice the grip Tomura has on his arm.

"Thanks for the advice!" All Might says. "If it's true, you've made this easier for me."

Tomura smiles, smug, but All Might is no longer paying attention to notice. The hero grabs the nomu about the waist - ignoring the beast's delayed attempts to clutch at him - and bends over backwards, slamming the nomu exposed-brain first into the ground.

The shockwave and amount of dust produced are akin to an explosion. Complaining under his breath, Tomura braces against it, but Izuku is significantly smaller and his feet slide across the ground. He has to let go of Tomura or risk dragging the older boy along with him. He falls to his knees, skin shredding against the rough concrete, and shifts his fingers into hard, black talons. Whatever material they are made of is harder than anything Izuku has encountered, allowing them to sink into the stone with minimal resistance, anchoring Izuku as wind whips wildly at his figure.

When the wind lets up, he pulls his fingers from the ground and reverts their shape, panting slightly. Four quirks used in such a short span of time and Izuku is feeling the beginnings of fatigue. He staggers back to his feet, knees bleeding sluggishly. Tomura spares him a glance and Izuku shakes his head, telling him there's nothing to be concerned about. They both turn their attention back to All Might and the nomu, staring through the haze of dust as it slowly dissipates, Tomura eager and Izuku resigned as they wait to see the outcome.

It is worse than Izuku hoped - which, of course, is all the better for Tomura, who makes a pleased noise. All Might is bent backwards in an arch, but the nomu has been pushed through one of Kurogiri's

portals, instead of into the ground. The top half of the beast emerges beneath All Might's spine, both claws sunk deep into the hero's sides. Izuku can see blood seeping into the white of All Might's dress shirt.

"Did you think you could stop him by burying him in the concrete?" Tomura asks. "Oh, this is good. What a perfect opportunity. Don't you think, Kurogiri?"

Releasing the nomus waist, All Might sits up in the monster's hold, grasping one of its hands with both of his and attempting to pry himself from its grip. The nomu doesn't waver in the slightest.

Tomura laughs, mocking. "That's not going to work. Nomu is just as strong as you are, you know." The nomu flexes its claws deeper, as if to prove a point, though the beast isn't nearly intelligent enough to be petty. All Might coughs, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth. Around either half of the nomu, Kurogiri's portals constrict slightly.

"This is your first offense?" All Might asks, voice serious and eyes threatening even as he continues to fail to escape the nomu's grasp. "You'd better prepare yourselves…"

Izuku shudders. Tomura stops giggling, sobering abruptly. One of his hands wanders to start idly scratching at his neck.

"Kurogiri," he says, matching All Might's tone. Kurogiri's portals constrict further. The main mass of his body stretches and elongates, looming over All Might's prone form. The hero glowers at the show of intimidation. Izuku takes a step forward, though he can't say what for.

"I do not want blood and guts overflowing within me," Kurogiri says, dignified as ever, despite the goriness of his words, "but it would be an honor to take in a man as great as you. As fast as you are, we needed Nomu to restrain you, but with his job done, it falls to *me* to finish the task. Have Nomu immobilize you and then, when your body is halfway through, close the gate… and *tear you apart.* "

Izuku did not expect this. Tomura has always had a bloodlust and Izuku has always been aware of it, but Kurogiri has never shown anything but a polite distaste for violence - desensitized, certainly, but also disinterested. Even today, he had chosen to incapacite Thirteen rather than kill them. Izuku didn't know the details of the plan to kill All Might, but he never expected that *Kurogiri* would be the one to deal the finishing blow.

Izuku had thought that Kurogiri was like him - inescapably bound to All for One, but for reasons *other* than mutual desires. To learn otherwise feels like a betrayal, though it probably shouldn't. Izuku shouldn't be so surprised. Whether Kurogiri himself wants All Might dead or not, Izuku will likely never know, but Kurogiri, like Tomura, does anything All for One tells him to. Murder is not an exception.

Izuku closes his eyes. It is cowardly, perhaps - his refusal to watch the violence he has enabled - but he can't stand to see it. He doesn't think he'll ever sleep again, if he sees. He thinks he'll go mad.

With his eyes closed, Izuku can't see what happens next, but he hears it. It's close enough for him to smell, even. Like caramel or burnt sugar. Familiar memories, tinted by fear and shame and regret, flood over Izuku, washing him away for a moment.

"DIE!" Izuku hears, though he can't say if the words are being said now or if they're just an echo from years ago.

"All I heard is that you all are here to kill All Might," a new, unfamiliar voice says. The speaker, a boy, pauses, the silence filled with words from others that Izuku doesn't pay attention to. Then, the boy continues, "The Symbol of Peace cannot be killed by the likes of you."

You're right , Izuku thinks as Tomura scoffs at his side. *He can't* .

But if All Might doesn't die here today, they will be back another day. And if Tomura or Kurogiri or Izuku himself die here, then someone else will come. They will keep coming, over and over, until the job is done. Because they are just pawns on a chessboard, and losing them means little to the man playing the game.

All for One is always thinking at least ten moves ahead, afterall.

But Izuku - he's not actually a pawn, is he? He's not even meant to be a piece on the board.

A brief lull falls over the battle at the central plaza, as all the new players stand and size each other up. None of them are thinking about the invisible participant, the one behind the scenes, pulling all the strings. They don't know what he has in store for them and they don't have any plans to stop him.

But Izuku knows.

And there's a chance he can do something about it.

The tension cracks and the fight starts moving again, but Izuku takes a deep breath, centers himself, and ignores it all. He stretches out his awareness, farther than he has ever had cause to in the warehouse, brushing over the quirks of villains and students and heroes alike in the search of one, specifically.

When he finds it, he pulls. With the distance between them, it takes a moment to reach him - nearly half a minute - but Erasure, like all quirks, comes to Izuku easily and without resistance.

He tells himself that he'll give it back when he's done with it. He refuses to think, for the moment, about what being done with it will mean.

Katsuki knew the villains were idiots - they had to be, breaking into UA, of all places, thinking they could kill All Might, of all people - but based on how laughably easy it is to take out the scrubs between the collapse zone and the central plaza, they're not only stupid, but fucking incompetent to boot. Incompetent and *pathetic* , practically pissing their pants as soon as Katsuki let off a single explosion, and not even a big one, at that. Sure, Katsuki is pretty damned impressive. He's strong as hell and he's going to be number one someday, so they're right to be afraid of him, but he's still only fifteen years old and those grown-ass, whole fucking *adults* couldn't even put a scratch on him. He had taken out nearly a dozen of them single-handed.

Well, technically Shitty Hair is there, too. The way he keeps yammering on about "manliness" or whatever the hell type of complex he has makes it pretty fucking hard for Katsuki to ignore him. But it's not like Shitty Hair had actually *helped* or anything, and if he took out one or two villains himself along the way, it's nothing Katsuki couldn't have handled on his own. Really, he'd *rather* have been on his own if it meant he could get even a moment of peace and fucking quiet.

"Shut up!" Katsuki snaps at the spiky idiot as they draw close to the central plaza where the main fight is happening. "You've gotta be fuckin quiet or they're gonna hear us coming from a mile off!" The bastard gives Katsuki a thumbs up, grinning, and if those pointy teeth

of his can't make him look intimidating, Katsuki doesn't think anything can.

Katsuki looks over the plaza, taking a moment to assess the situation, but the main problem is pretty immediately obvious. Some freak of nature has All Might trapped in its claws, while the misty jackass Katsuki is after gives his villain monologue. Fucking *incompetent* , Katsuki swears. Everyone knows that if you want something done you just fucking *do it* . There's no reason to *talk* about it, especially not in the long-winded over dramatic way villains are so stereotypically fond of.

Katsuki doesn't bother to say anything to Shitty Hair - again, why fucking bother with that waste-of-time bullshit. With one hand, he propels himself forward, throwing himself into the fight high and fast. With the other, he aims a large explosion at the center of the warp gate's mass. The detonation doesn't connect with anything, but it wasn't particularly meant to. While the villain reels from the size and volume of the blast, Katsuki uses the smoke kicked up as a cover, striking with precision to grab the misty jackass' metal collar, using his momentum to take them both to the ground.

That's what the fucker gets for dropping Katsuki off in the middle of nowhere like yesterday's god damned trash.

Katsuki has the gate pinned for all of a second when the Half-and-Half Bastard shows up, sending forward a wave of ice that entirely coats half of the monster holding All Might. Grudgingly, Katsuki can admit the display is pretty impressive, even if it's unnecessary, since he's got the situation under control already. As All Might pries himself free of the thing's weakened grip, Shitty Hair dives in as well, lunging at Handjob and then complaining loudly when the crusty bastard just steps out of the way.

Crusty sighs. "Well, we're in a pinch, now. Without our warp gate, we have no way out of here."

Katsuki smiles viscously, turning his attention back to the nobody he has pinned. The gate watches him with unreadable yellow eyes that twist and waver like smoke.

"You careless bastard," Katsuki mocks. "I knew it. You act so untouchable, but only parts of you can actually turn into a misty warp gate. You just cover your actual body with the fog, huh? If you were actually just mist and physical attacks couldn't touch you, you

wouldn't have had to dodge back at the entrance. You should be more fucking careful with shit like that, you know." Beneath him, mist twists and writhes, but the tendrils shudder to a halt when Katsuki sets off a burst of small warning explosions. "Don't even think about it. You move a fucking inch in a way I don't like and your ass is done for."

The Hand Fucker stands to the side, hands clasped politely in front of him as if he isn't some kind of raging homicidal bastard. He's not half as afraid as he should be, considering that he's facing down the number one hero with his escape route cut off, but then again, Katsuki had decided from the very beginning that these guys were obviously morons.

"Wow," the moron says, word drawn out in a self-satisfied mockery of amazement. "Half my party has been taken out and they're not even injured. Kids these days really are amazing. You're gonna make the League of Villains look bad."

The attitude grates at Katsuki's nerves, all casual and disinterested, like he's fucking above them all even though he's getting his ass handed to him. Anger bubbles up Katsuki's throat, and he's about to snap something in response - probably something along the lines of not needing to make them look bad when they do the job on their own - when the villain speaks again.

"Nomu."

The thing, still half frozen and stuck through a warp gate, shudders. Its muscles shift and roll beneath its skin, disgustingly pronounced, as it gets its legs beneath it and hauls itself from the murky portal. As it moves, the ice around it creaks and groans, horrible sounds that the monster pays no attention to at all. When it frees itself and comes to a stand, the ice lets out a series of cracks, all of them as loud as gunshots, fracturing apart and taking skin and flesh and bone along the way. The freak teeters, but does not make a sound, seeming indifferent to the sudden loss of half its limbs.

Blood flows lethargically from the stumps left behind, vessels constricted by the cold. There are chunks of meat scattered across the ground and Katsuki can't tear his eyes off of them. The lack of gore somehow makes it all the more gruesome. And Handjob is still just standing and watching, so assured, not a drop of fear in him, and Katsuki's skin *crawls* with the sudden certainty that the fucker has something up those ratty sleeves of his.

Only a moment later, the creeping suspicion is confirmed. The monster's raw flesh writhes and bubbles outward, swelling and then bursting with a terrible wet noise that turns Katsuki's stomach. Compared to the almost anticlimactic nature of the loss of the limbs, their regeneration is graphic and disturbing. Shitty Hair makes an ill-sounding noise to Katsuki's side.

"So his quirk wasn't shock absorption, after all," All Might says, grim faced. Even he's not entirely unaffected by the sight, a hint of revulsion ticking at the corner of his unsmiling mouth.

"Oh, it is," Handjob corrects with poorly concealed glee. "It's just not his *only* one. Afterall, he needs more than just shock absorption to go toe-to-toe with the guy at the top of the leaderboards. He's been modified to take you at 100%. *This* is his Super Regeneration."

Katsuki barely has time to contemplate the implication that this thing has *more than one fucking quirk* - how is that even possible? What kind of freak of nature are they actually dealing with here? It's overwhelming to even consider and, for a half second, Katsuki stops following the conversation.

A small corner of Katsuki's mind, dark and well ignored, grows larger and the thoughts he closes up there leak like a gas into the rest of his mind, faint and intangible, but deadly all the same. He thinks - against his own will, like the thought is holding him at gunpoint - about a boy who briefly had two quirks while Katsuki himself had none at all. He does not let the thought go further, even as it tries to take shape. He does not think the name, does not picture those eyes, does not remember the feeling.

Vulnerable and helpless - so, so helpless. Useless and worthless and not even himself, anymore.

He hears Handjob say, "Now, let's get our gate back," but it seems inconsequential next to the idea of somehow having *more than one fucking quirk*.

He hears, "Nomu," but does not think about what that means because he is too busy pointedly *not* thinking about other things.

Even if Katsuki had been paying proper attention, even if he had been vigilant and on his guard, he never would have been able to move in time. As it is, he doesn't even see anything. One moment he is frozen, held hostage by his own contemplation, and the next he is tumbling across the ground.

He lands, half sitting half sprawled, next to Shitty Hair and Freezerburn, neither of whom notice him. They stare, eyes bulging and appalled, at the deep trench carved through the floor of the USJ, leading to a distant wall which has largely been reduced to rubble, dust clouding the air. Katsuki stares as well, entirely unsure about what just occurred. The numbness of surprise gives quickly to anger at *being* surprised, anger at himself for his distraction and anger at the villains for daring to fucking touch him in the first place.

“Oh my god, Tomura!” someone screams, puncturing the moment of silence that had otherwise only been broken by the soft click and clatter of bits of debris from the wall falling against each other.

Katsuki wonders if maybe he just died. If that monstrous thing slammed into him so hard and fast he didn’t even get to feel it, if he’s pulverized into mincemeat somewhere beyond that veil of dust.

He must be dead, because he’s looking at a fucking ghost.

Green hair and green eyes. Too many freckles on too-round cheeks. Trembling lower lip and pathetically beguiling expression. Pitiful and on the brink of tears.

“What did you do?!” Midoriya Izuku demands, clinging to the arm of the villain covered in disembodied hands, clutching at his sleeve and shaking him.

Or that is what Izuku would be doing, would be demanding, if he were actually here. But he’s not, because he can’t be. Katsuki can’t wrap his head around it. Whatever is happening, Katsuki knows he is angry - or perhaps he has transcended simple anger and jumped into catastrophic *outrage* - but that is all he understands. Nothing else makes any fucking sense.

Except, in a way, it kind of does, doesn’t it? Katsuki had been so glad when Deku had been removed from his life, but Katsuki had always been the only one keeping Deku in check, the only one who knew what the other boy was capable of and kept him in his place. Without Katsuki around, who reminded Deku what he really was, huh? Nobody, apparently.

Because here Deku is, right where Katsuki never expected to see him but always knew he would end up.

A villain.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
Violence, injury, and associated distress.
Because we're still at the USJ!

Izuku finally finished step one of his plan! It only took, what, ~45k words? Rest assured, it shouldn't take another 50k to get to step two. Unless I'm lying, which, as we have established, is a very real possibility.

Katsuki @ Izuku: You don't even GO here!

Aizawa: I'm a bad bitch, you can't kill me
Also Aizawa, on the brink of death: I need coffee and medical attention, in that order

Next Chapter: Erasure - Part IV (god damn it)
Update: Dec. 3
I have a dentist appointment next week, but that shouldn't stop me from posting. Chapter will probably just be up a couple of hours earlier or later than usual

Erasure - Part IV

Chapter Notes

CWs in endnotes

QUESTION
Y'all want a discord? A couple of people have suggested it, and I know a lot of fics/authors have one when they reach a certain level of popularity (and man, is it weird to think of this story as popular, but that's the imposter syndrome talking) but I've never joined one.
What are they for? What channels would it need? What would I even call it? If you like the idea, give me your guidance and wisdom, oh readers.

Anyway, I'm now off to the dentist. Pray for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sending Nomu to retrieve Kurogiri has mixed results. The key element of their escape plan is free, which Tomura counts as a success. But now Izuku is yelling which is … less satisfying, to say the least.

"What did you do?!" the brat practically shrieks, shaking at Tomura's arm with enough force to make him sway slightly back and forth.

"I got our gate back," Tomura replies, stating the obvious.

Izuku keens slightly in response, a small but distinctly pained cry that reminds Tomura of a wounded animal. Izuku presses his forehead to Tomura's shoulder and shakes him harder for a moment before going slack. Izuku is still and silent, but Tomura knows he's crying with a certainty that steals some of the breath from his lungs, chest aching. Wetness on his sleeve confirms it a moment later.

Tomura hasn't been blind to Izuku's heightening emotional state through the course of the attack, and he shouldn't be surprised that it's culminating in this kind of breakdown. Really, he should have seen this coming before they even stepped foot in the USJ. He shouldn't have allowed Izuku to come at all. After all, the younger boy has never really had a stomach for violence. He's better suited as a support character – assisting from behind the scenes and kept safely out of the main battle. It was foolish to bring Izuku here, for both the wellbeing of the boy and the plan, but it seemed like it would be more

fun, playing in co-op, so Tomura had ignored the glaring problems.

Tomura scans their surroundings, trying to quickly evaluate the situation. It won't do for them to be attacked while Izuku is in the middle of a breakdown. The three students that interrupted the plan hover to the side, even the explosive blonde one with the bad attitude that had been holding Kurogiri hostage. Tomura clicks his tongue at the realization that All Might must have taken the blow for the brat, but he supposes it's for the best, since it means that the hero isn't an immediate issue while Izuku has his moment. Tomura keeps one eye on the cloud of dust where All Might must have ended up, waiting for the man to emerge.

With the other, he watches students themselves, all three of whom stare at Tomura and Izuku, attention caught by Izuku's brief moment of hysteria. Whatever quirk the rogue had been using must have either been deactivated or lost its effectiveness when the boy was screaming, because the hero brats are looking more at Izuku than Tomura.

Blasty seems especially fixated, glaring at Izuku with exponentially increasing ire that Tomura can almost feel a kinship with. He knows how it feels, that black sludge of rage – thick, heavy, and sticky – and he wonders what it is doing in a hero student. Under different circumstances, he would probably be fascinated, but as it is, Tomura tugs Izuku behind him slightly, positioning himself between his brother and that toxic look. Izuku lets Tomura move him with no protest, no reaction at all.

The blonde had been sitting on the ground, legs sprawled in front of him, but as Tomura shifts, he stands. The movement is graceful, but full of a dangerous, lurking tension, like a rubber band pulled taut.

"Bakugou!" the shirtless redhead who tried to attack Tomura exclaims. "You're not dead!" Behind Tomura, Izuku moves, pulling his face from Tomura's shoulder and peering over it instead. The blonde one takes a slow, intentional step forward and Tomura resists the urge to grab Izuku's head and force him back down to keep the brat hidden in his shadow.

"Deku," Blasty growls, low and threatening, more sinister than the feral and violent glee he showed earlier when he had Kurogiri at his mercy.

Alarms go off in Tomura's head, but Izuku – whose sense of self-preservation has always been inconsistent, at best – doesn't seem to

notice, attempting to duck out from behind Tomura and into the open. Tomura grabs his arm before he can, grip careful, as always, but tight and unwavering, nonetheless.

“Kacchan!” Izuku calls. His voice is thick with tears and relief, both of which prick like pins along Tomura’s skin. “You dodged!”

“Shut up, scum.”

Izuku flinches. Tomura squeezes his arm.

“You’re Kacchan?” Tomura asks, looking at the boy through new eyes. “Bakugou Katsuki? I’ve heard a lot about you. *Scum.*” And as angry and vitriolic as Bakugou made his words, Tomura makes his own ten times more so. He has heard all about *Bakugou Katsuki*, poster boy for the new generation of heroes, who thought violence was his privilege. It seems he hasn’t changed since he was ten years old.

Izuku reaches up, grabs the wrist of the hand that Tomura is using to hold him, and squeezes once in reply to Tomura’s earlier gesture. Tomura forces himself to take a breath through the hatred that is trying to replace the air in his lungs.

Bakugou takes another step forward, then another, each faster than the last. His palms crackle with small explosions. Tomura lets go of Izuku’s arm – though he’s sure to shove his brother back behind him, first – keeping both hands free, splayed open at his hips. Another step – two, three – and the other students are shouting words of alarm or warning, falling on deaf ears since Bakugou is obviously only seconds from launching himself and Tomura is all too happy to intercept.

A fraction of a moment after Bakugou’s feet leave the ground, he is snatched out of the air, a large hand coming from nowhere to close around the metal collar of his hero costume. All Might holds him up, feet suspended nearly a foot off the ground, not even sparing his student a glance as the child kicks and snarls like a savage beast. Instead, All Might stares at Tomura, eyes so intensely blue they are practically glowing beneath the heavy shadow of his brow.

“I will handle things from here, young Bakugou.” He drops a loudly but incoherently protesting Bakugou to the ground, stopping him with an arm across the chest when the teen tries to advance anyway. Without turning to look at them, he addresses the group of students, “You three, return to the entrance.” To Tomura, he says, “You really don’t know how to hold back, do you?”

“Hold back?” Tomura echoes. “Why would I do that? *You’re* not. I mean, that… *angry one,* he threatened to kill Kurogiri, you know. And just now, he tried to attack a helpless little kid. I was just trying to protect my companions.”

“Helpless my ass,” Bakugou – who unsurprisingly has made no move to return to the entrance, though he has retreated slightly to stand with the other students – barks. “He’s a fucking *villain*. I’d be doing the world a favor.” Ignoring the comment is a struggle, especially when Izuku flinches at his back, but Tomura keeps his attention on All Might.

“But it’s fine when *they* do it, huh?” Tomura asks, mock thoughtful. “They’re doing the world a *favor*. Violence for the sake of others makes it admirable. It’s okay to hurt people if you’re protecting others. Well, as long as those others are *worthy* of protection.

“And you know what, hero? I’m angry. I’m angry at this world that calls the same violent acts ‘heroic’ or ‘villainous.’ *Symbol of Peace.”* Tomura barks a bitter laugh. “It’s a joke, really. You go around pretending that you save everyone, and everyone else pretends that they’re safe, but you’re just a sword masquerading as a shield.

“Violence only breeds violence, All Might. The world will finally see that, when we kill you.”

“That’s preposterous,” All Might replies so immediately that Tomura knows he didn’t bother to listen. “I’ve seen eyes like yours in countless villains over the years. You revel in destruction. You just want to enjoy this, don’t you, you liar?”

He’s not entirely wrong. Tomura is well aware of the flaws in the hero system, but social reform is more up Izuku’s alley than his. Tomura would rather just tear it all down. Sensei, Izuku, or someone else can worry about rebuilding things. Still, the truth of All Might’s words does nothing to negate the truth of Tomura’s, regardless of his personal investment in the message they are trying to send.

One of the students, the one half encased in ice, like some kind of arctic cyborg, steps forward. “It’s three against four,” he says.

The shirtless one nods and punches jaggedly shaped fists together. “These guys may be crazy, but we have them outnumbered! We can push them back!”

Four against four, actually, but Tomura isn’t arrogant enough to

correct them.

Given Izuku's behavior – first crying, now silently hiding behind Tomura – it's reasonable for them to have counted him out, but ultimately foolish. As soft a touch as Izuku is, he's smart and skilled, not an opponent to underestimate. He would doubtlessly fight to protect Tomura and Kurogiri if push came to shove. Maybe he wouldn't want to kill anyone, but Tomura is certain that Izuku could non-lethally subdue any of the three with minimal struggle. Tomura may regret bringing Izuku here, but when it comes to surviving and escaping – if not succeeding – Izuku is an ace up their sleeve even more than Nomu is.

"No!" All Might snaps back at the NPCs, though his head only half-turns in their direction and his eyes stay trained on Tomura. "Run away!"

"Earlier, you would have been in trouble without our help," Frosty says flatly.

"That was a different situation, young Todoroki. Thank you for your help, but it's fine now! Get to safety and watch as a pro gives it everything he's got!"

The students shift on their feet but make no move to retreat, faces concerned, doubtful and enraged – Shirtless, Frosty, and Bakugou respectively. Responding to their hesitation, All Might turns, facing them fully for the first time since he emerged from the crater Nomu left him in. Tomura can see the corner of his mouth lift as he grins at them, flashing them a thumbs up. It's meant to be reassuring, Tomura is sure, but to him, on the other side of things, with the hero so carelessly *facing away* as if Tomura's not even a threat, the gesture is empty and taunting and infuriating. He claws at his neck, slipping his fingers under the hands there to get at relatively unmarked skin.

Tomura has had enough talking.

"Nomu. Kurogiri. Handle him. I'll deal with the children. Now, let's clear this and go home."

He grins, knowing the expression likely makes him look unhinged – Izuku has said as much more times than Tomura could count. He wonders briefly what would be more unnerving: wearing the hands he clasps onto his figure like body armor or leaving his face bare and his expression visible.

“Tomura, don’t,” Izuku protests.

But Tomura is already running forwards towards the brats. Bakugou surges to meet him instantaneously, but the other two hesitate in surprise for a solid second before taking up defensive stances.

Before Tomura can reach them, Nomu collides with All Might in a meeting of titans. The generated air pressure is so insane that it sends Tomura careening through the air, flipping over once and barely getting his feet back under him in time to land safely. The students were propelled in the opposite direction, crouched on the ground with a large slate of ice bracing them from behind. They aren’t that far away, still easily within attacking distance, but Tomura can’t risk so much as lifting his feet, under threat of going airborne again.

To the side, Kurogiri’s form wavers with the wind, not able to take any shape long enough to be helpful. Closer, Izuku kneels on the ground, fingers buried to the knuckle in concrete to keep himself anchored.

“Damn,” Tomura curses under his breath, then raises his voice, shouting so his words aren’t stolen by the wind, “Hey! You already know about his shock absorption, what’s the point of all this?”

“Shock absorption!” All Might calls back. “Not shock *nullification!* All quirks have their limits! If he can handle me at 100%, I’ll just force him to surrender from *beyond that.*” The confidence of the words makes Tomura’s teeth grind, scraping painfully against each other at odd angles. The fighting pair go storming through a copse of nearby trees, flashing in and out of sight as they trade blows, their path of destruction and chaos obvious even when they’re out of view.

“Tomura,” Izuku says, barely audible over the clamor of the battle. “We have to leave!”

Tomura had been planning to ignore the brat but turns to him in surprise. “Huh? Why the hell would we do that?”

“This isn’t going to work! We lost the moment one of the students escaped. It’s only a matter of time before this place is swarming with pros, and the longer we try to delay the inevitable, the more likely it is that we’re not getting out of here.”

Flying out of the trees, All Might and Nomu go aerial. Rapid series of jabs and punches volley them in the air, suspending them against gravity. Nomu is slower than All Might, but shows no sign of damage

or fatigue, while the hero has blood leaking from his mouth and abdomen.

Tomura is sure that they can win. Sensei specifically made Nomu for this purpose, and if Sensei says he is strong enough, then *he is*.

But, Tomura must admit to himself, digging his thumbnail into the hollow of his collarbones, that this is a marathon, not a sprint. This fight is a matter of *enduring* and *outlasting* and Izuku is right that they simply might not have *time* for that.

Nomu swings an arm at All Might's head, but the hero catches it around the elbow, twisting through the air, using all his momentum and weight to hurl Tomura's specially made weapon into the ground. Beneath Nomu's body, the ground spiderwebs and concaves, huge slabs of concrete flying into the air as the floor of the USJ is cratered.

"We have to *go,"* Izuku insists, even as Nomu stands, unaffected by the impact. "Tomura, *please*, you have to listen to me!"

"Aren't you meant to be invisible?" Tomura snaps back, patience frayed.

"There's no point! Everyone already knows I'm here. If they know to look, the quirk won't stop them from seeing. Another reason we *need to leave.*"

"I won't let anyone hurt you," Tomura assures, and despite Izuku's irritating persistence that they retreat, Tomura means it. Regardless of what else happens in the battle, Izuku being injured has never been an option.

"It's not me I'm worried about!"

All Might interrupts, "You should have listened to your companion when you had the chance, villain. Have you ever heard these words? Go beyond! *Plus Ultra!"*

The cry is long and drawn out and laughable in its dramatism, but it is paired with a blow so strong Nomu's body seems to stretch around it like putty, distorting in an unnatural arch around All Might's fist. For a fraction of a second, Nomu is braced against the ground, and it seems like he can weather the hit, but then the force overcomes him, driving him up and back with so much speed he becomes a blur to the eye.

Steel screams as Nomu crashes into the side of the domed ceiling, bending plates and then splitting them, leaving a jagged hole behind. In only fractions of seconds, barely slowed by the collision, Nomu – the League of Villain's secret weapon, their trump card – is gone.

Izuku watches as the nomu is ejected from the USJ with dreadful resignation. He had known, from the very beginning, that no monster All for One made was going to be enough to kill the Symbol of Peace, but he is not glad to be correct, especially as Tomura makes an inarticulate sound of frustration under his breath.

"We need to go," Izuku says again, praying that this time Tomura will hear him.

"What's wrong?" All Might asks, standing alone and victorious in a cloud of dust. "You said you'd 'clear this,' didn't you? Well, come and get me if you can." Any impact Izuku's plea may have had is erased by the taunt.

"You were meant to be weaker," Tomura growls. "We were–"

"We were mistaken," Izuku interrupts. He closes the distance between them to stand again by Tomura's side. "Let's *go.* Without the nomu–"

"Nomu. Man, if only we still had Nomu. That guy could go against All Might without even thinking of anything."

Izuku doesn't bother pointing out that they had already set the nomu against All Might, that it had already failed them. Tomura wouldn't see the reasoning in something like that. He's beyond it, at this point.

"We don't have him," Izuku says, clinging to whatever tendrils of patience he can find. "So, we need to leave."

"No," Kurogiri interjects, voice firm and confident. For a flash of an instant, Izuku wants to throttle him, but swallows the urge down and buries it with all of his festering frustration. "He was certainly weakened by that attack. We likely have at least a few more minutes before reinforcements arrive, meaning the children are his only backup, and they seem to be frozen in fear. We, on the other hand, still have underlings that can be used. If we work together, we still

have a chance of killing him."

Izuku darts a glance over to the students, and while a moment ago they may have been frozen in any mix of fear, shock, or uncertainty, there is movement among them now. As Katsuki stands, Tomura's head turns towards the motion and Izuku knows the moment the older boy remembers Katsuki's presence, his entire body growing impossibly tense beside Izuku.

"We have to get out of here," Izuku says one more time, rote and hollow.

But Tomura does not listen. His anger has already found its perfect match, its perfect outlet. Two identically enraged pairs of red eyes clash, and the both of them smile feral, savage smiles. They take half steps towards each other, in sync.

Izuku grabs Tomura's arm just as the red-haired boy with the hardening quirk grabs Katsuki's. Katsuki shakes his classmate's grip off in an instant, but Tomura locks up in Izuku's, bicep twitching as he restrains himself from blindly lunging forward.

"I don't want him dead, Tomura," Izuku says.

He knows it means something. It's not as if Tomura doesn't care what he wants. The entire reason he wants to hurt Katsuki in the first place is to avenge what was done to Izuku in his youth. Izuku's words mean something here. They have power over Tomura, Izuku knows.

But he's not sure it's enough. Not sure how strongly his desires weigh against the blind thirst for violence that has possessed Tomura here today.

"Worry about yourself, Deku," Katsuki spits from across the field.

That is what breaks things.

That single careless and spiteful sentence is all it takes for Tomura to snap.

He tears himself from Izuku's grip and is gone in an instant. Katsuki aims an explosion at him as he approaches, but Kurogiri wraps a portal around it, easy as anything. It is child's play, how quickly Tomura has his hands on Katsuki, wrapped around his gauntlet as the other two students dive back and out of the way. The support item crumbles, turning to dust with a creeping slowness that is entirely

deliberate on Tomura's part, designed to intimidate and horrify rather than simply destroy.

"You're a nasty one, aren't you?" Tomura asks, leaning close to sneer in Katsuki's face. "You attack my warp gate; you attack my player two. Man, you're just asking for trouble, aren't you?"

Katsuki's lip curls into some unnatural combination of a snarl and a smirk. With Tomura so close to him, it is easy for him to spit in the older boy's face. White and frothy, most of it splatters on the back of the hand over Tomura's face, but some drips through the cracks of the fingers and Tomura reels back with a disgusted howl. Tomura lets Katsuki go, stumbling back a few steps to rip the hand from his face. Harsh and compulsive, he scrubs at his skin with the sleeve of his shirt, muttering words under his breath that Izuku can only hear the venom of.

Katsuki does not wait for Tomura to pull himself back together. He winds back his right arm, blatantly telegraphing the trajectory and strength of his intended blow, just like he always did when they were children.

It's simple for Izuku to step between them. He activates one of many speed enhancing quirks he has stored away to cross the distance in the time it takes to blink, wrapping his arms around Katsuki's in an instant. Grasping the boy right above his elbow, Izuku braces his feet, bends his knees slightly, pivots, and sends Katsuki flying over his shoulder. The blonde hits the ground hard, air audibly punched from his lungs, and rolls twice before popping up onto an elbow, heaving to catch his breath.

Izuku snatches the severed hand from Tomura's grip and Tomura stares at him, eyes wide and wild, mad in more ways than one, but beneath all of that *scared* in the way Izuku despises most.

"We are leaving," Izuku says, no longer asking, no longer begging.

Tomura grabs him by the collar of his shirt and tosses him to the side. For a moment, Izuku thinks, rather hysterically, that he has finally pushed Tomura too far. That he has finally discovered the hard limit of his not-brother's tolerance. That he's about to be made the target of all that rage.

Then Katsuki is there, hand snatching and combusting right where Izuku's head had been. Tomura must be able to feel the heat of the explosions, as close as he is – Izuku is familiar with the blasts and the

exact ways they'll sear at your skin from various distances – but if Tomura feels any pain, he doesn't show it.

Instead, he closes his hand around Katsuki's throat.

But there is no screaming, no blood, not yet. Tense silence falls, the type of quiet that only comes with bated breath and bodies held so taut that they tremble in their attempts at stillness.

Only four fingers.

Izuku doesn't dare stand up, afraid that small movement will somehow result in a deadly twitch. Even Katsuki stays still, doesn't fight or attempt to free himself, aware of just how precarious his situation is.

"Put him down," Izuku says, low and strained.

Katsuki, rendered silent for a moment, growls, though he still doesn't struggle. "I don't need your help you shitty fucking *thief*, you goddamned *villain*, get out of my *fucking life already*, I'm going to ki–" Tomura's fingers tighten and Katsuki's words gurgle off.

"You're the kind of person I hate the most," Tomura says, soft and casual as Katsuki goes red from oxygen deprivation and fury. "A real hypocrite, you know? You're supposed to be a hero, but he's the one trying to save you."

"Tomura, don't."

"You won't kill him. He probably deserves it, but you're too *good–"* the word is spat, simultaneously spiteful and fond, like a bite that could have injected venom and chose not to "–for that. So, I'll do it for you. Everyone wins."

What is All Might doing, Izuku wonders with frantic helplessness. Isn't this exactly the kind of thing he should be stopping? No, he's just standing there, exactly where he was when he defeated the nomu, watching. There's pain and frustration in his gaze – a good amount of rage as well – but he just stands there, even when Izuku manages to make eye contact.

And the students – they just stand there, too. The one with the hardening quirk – his face is a study of horror, and his hands float around his stomach as if reaching for something to do, but he is paralyzed. The one with the temperature control quirk, the chimera –

he is entirely blank, mouth flat, eyes empty, arms limp at his sides.

Useless. They're all useless. It all falls on Izuku. All the pressure. All the blame.

Like always.

"Put him down," Izuku repeats. "Tomura. *Please*."

"Shigaraki Tomura," Kurogiri says. "This boy is not our target. We are running out of time if we want to destroy the world's Symbol."

Tomura does not respond for a long moment, long enough that Katsuki starts face starts to gradient from red to purple. Then Tomura sighs and, with a deceptively careless motion, flings Katsuki into the red-haired student, sending both boys tumbling to the ground. Katsuki coughs and hacks in the background while Tomura turns back to All Might.

"How unprofessional," he says, "getting distracted with the scrubs when the final boss is right in front of me. Where were we?"

"We're done here," Izuku announces, before All Might can open his mouth and antagonize Tomura further.

"We haven't cleared the level yet."

"No. We've failed it. It's time for us to go so we can play another day. Kurogiri."

"Shigaraki Izuku. I don't think–"

"I don't care," Izuku bites out, uncharacteristic and uncomfortable, but necessary. "Open a portal."

Kurogiri hesitates, but only for a moment. Tomura is the one in charge here, yes, but Izuku is his father's son, and there is power in that, on the rare occasion he is willing to wield it. The portal blooms like a bruise in front of them and Izuku gestures to it with a stern glare at Tomura.

"You're going to flee?" All Might calls to them, with a thread of desperation in his voice. He's stalling, Izuku realizes. "Run away like cowards the moment things don't go according to plan?"

Tomura turns to the hero with a snarl primed and ready, but Izuku grabs him by the arm and tosses him through the gate before he can

get a word out.

“It’s a tactical retreat,” Izuku corrects, half to himself, moving towards the portal without sending All Might a single glance.

Pain bursts through his shoulder when his foot is just halfway through, and he does not walk the rest of the distance so much as fall.

There is an unusual moment of delay between the portal’s appearance and Tomura’s entrance into the bar. Calling it an entrance is generous, really. Tomura stumbles in at an angle that sends him flying back-first into the bar, tripping over his feet and ending up on the floor, limbs tangled with the legs of the barstools he brought down with him. Hisashi steps to the side just in time to avoid the worst of the mess, staring impassively down at Tomura, who shoots sidelong glances in his direction as he tries to stand, cursing under his breath with each bumped shin or elbow. The boy is scowling intensely, his baleful stare exposed in the absence of the severed hand that typically covers his face when participating in more “villainous” activities.

A moment later, a second figure tumbles through the warp gate, no more gracefully than the first, and it is only centuries of experience that prevent Hisashi from doing a double take. Izuku falls face first into the bar. Catching himself with one arm, he rolls to the side and tucks his legs up, drawing them out the portal to allow Kurogiri to close it.

Let the record show that Hisashi, until this very second, was under the impression that Izuku was in his bedroom, locked away from the dirty-handed dealings he generally wanted no part of. It is rare for Hisashi to be truly surprised, but his son manages it far more often than most. Now it elicits a strange combination of pride and concern in Hisashi’s chest. Like surprise, these are feelings that only Izuku manages to evoke in him with any regularity. Even five years after embracing fatherhood, the emotions are still novel, given the nearly two centuries he spent more or less without them.

“You goddamned brat,” Tomura growls as he finally manages to stand. He drags one of the many fallen barstools up with him. Eddying into the room as soon as the portal closes, Kurogiri stares, the narrowing of his yellow eyes the only expression of his irritation at the mess.

“We didn’t discuss Izuku’s attendance,” Hisashi says, carefully neutral.

Tomura’s makes to respond, but Izuku interjects, “It w-was my id-idea.” His voice is strained, drawn tight in his throat. “He – he didn’t w-want me to go, but I… I ins-s-insisted.”

Unlike Tomura, Izuku has made no effort to stand, collapsed on his side with his legs half drawn up, curled around them in a loose fetal position. Any pride Hisashi felt at Izuku’s choice to actively involve himself in the mission gives way to concern.

“Are you alright?” he asks. For the first time in years, the quirks Hisashi has collected to compensate for his lack of sight don’t feel sufficient.

“I-I’m, um – I’m f-f-fine.” Izuku’s words crack around the edges, sounding raw in the spaces between. Tears start to drip from his eyes, carving paths along the bridge of his nose and thickening his voice with every word. “R-re-really. B-but – I, uh, I-I thi-think I’ve b-be-been – um, uh.”

Izuku’s stutter was quite persistent when he was younger, and though it has improved majorly over the years, it still makes occasional appearances whenever the boy is especially anxious or uncertain about something. Hisashi has never heard it like this though, fumbling and broken as if the syllables are shaking apart behind his teeth. The concern spikes.

Hisashi drops to his knees next to his son, placing a hand on his forehead. The skin there is slick with a cold sweat and Hisashi spares a moment to brush the boy’s hair back before activating a diagnostic quirk and scanning him over.

Some things are to be expected – bruises from training and rough housing with Tomura, a degree of quirk fatigue that is noticeable enough to register but not extreme enough to warrant attention, old injuries to his right wrist that still sometimes cause him a low level of discomfort.

Hisashi does *not* expect to find a bullet hole through his only son’s left shoulder.

In his years, Hisashi has seen a considerable number of injuries. He has caused a substantial proportion of them. Blood, violence, wounds of any nature – these are things he has long since been desensitized to,

and never expected to be bothered by again.

But this – a *hole* through his *son's* shoulder, *blood* leaking through *Izuku's* fingers onto the floor of the bar, *Izuku* stuttering words out of teeth that he's clenched in *pain*. This is untenable.

"You've been shot," Hisashi says. Anger lurks under his calm tone, like some massive, starving beast that prowls beneath glass-smooth and deceptively deep waters.

"Y-yeah, u-uh, m-may-maybe. I th-think so."

"He's been *what?"* Tomura shouts, too loud for the size of the room they are all in. There is nothing insidious about his rage, snapping teeth in plain view. "How the *fuck* did that happen?!"

Under different circumstances, Hisashi would likely grimace at the language. Words are cheap to begin with, but curse words especially so, and he has tried to encourage his son and pupil to express themselves more eloquently. Tomura curses more often than Hisashi would like, but at the moment it seems warranted.

"W-w-wh–"

"Hush," Hisashi interrupts. Izuku's teeth snap together with an audible click. Hisashi's diagnostic quirk, still active, informs him that Izuku has just bitten his tongue, but the boy doesn't even seem to register that minor injury, eclipsed beneath the shadow of pain in his shoulder. "Kurogiri, explain."

"The attack did not go according to plan. The nomu you sent with us was defeated. Backup, retrieved by a wayward student, arrived just moments after the young master ordered a retreat. Unfortunately, the single instant of overlap was long enough for one of the heroes to fire a shot."

"Send me back," Tomura demands. "I'll show them what we're really capable of, I'll make them regret so much as *looking* at him–"

Hisashi interrupts what is quickly becoming the beginnings of a rant. "Sit down, Tomura." With a bitten back scoff, Tomura does.

Hisashi turns his attention back to his son. Izuku – wan on the floor, eyes clenched shut, hissing shaking and uneven breaths between his teeth – is holding himself together remarkably well, all things considered. In the grand scheme of things, the injury is not too severe.

Nothing of importance was hit and the bullet carved a clean path through and through. With the resources at their disposal, Izuku is in absolutely no danger.

But that doesn't make the injury *hurt* any less. Before now, the worst Izuku has ever been harmed was likely the sludge villain attack when he was ten. Even that incident resulted in mostly superficial physical damage, the majority of the trauma being mental and emotional. This is certainly the most pain Izuku has ever been in.

As Hisashi cards a hand through the sweat-damp hair at the nape of Izuku's neck, he hopes this is the most pain his son will *ever* be in. He hopes, but he knows that it's likely an empty sentiment, especially if Izuku's life ends up looking anything like Hisashi's own. Still, he'll do his best to shelter Izuku from whatever bits of it he can.

"You have a quirk for this, yes?" Hisashi asks. "I'm fairly certain I brought you one, at some point."

Izuku nods. "B-but it-it'll p-put-put me to sle-sl-sleep."

"Perhaps that's for the best. You're safe here. You can rest now. Activate the quirk and allow yourself to heal."

Izuku's eyes are bright and glassy with pain but intent as he stares up at Hisashi. Hisashi worries for a moment that Izuku will refuse, as unreasonably stubborn as he can sometimes be, but then his eyes dim and flutter shut. The diagnostic quirk pings the additional fatigue. Combined with the exhaustion from the attack on the USJ, it's likely that healing the injury will leave Izuku unconscious for several hours, at the least.

"Kurogiri, get him cleaned up and put away in his room, would you? Bandage him up, too. He should heal on his own without any difficulty, but it wouldn't do for him to bleed all over his things."

"Of course, Sir." Nodding, Kurogiri opens a portal beneath Izuku, dropping him gently in some other location, before disappearing himself to do as Hisashi bade.

"I'm not going to let them get away with this," Tomura says lowly once they are alone. He is seated obediently, but the fury in his eyes has not been tempered.

"Nor will I. They sealed their fates the moment they touched him. I don't take kindly to threats to me or mine, Tomura. You know this."

“Then why didn’t you let me go back? I’d make them pay, you know I would, it’s what you’ve been training me for–”

“An unknown number of professional heroes had arrived on the scene, my nomu was apparently defeated, you no longer had the element of surprise. Would you like me to list more flaws in your plan, or is that enough?” Tomura scowls, agitation clear as he scratches at his neck, but does not respond. “You already failed once. Are you really so eager to run in and fail a second time?”

“We shouldn’t have failed at all,” Tomura spits. “All Might was supposed to be weak. You said Nomu would be able to take him.”

“And on a different day, perhaps it would have. No plan is perfect. You account for what you can and make up for the rest with luck and skill. Today, you were neither lucky nor skilled. You underestimated them and failed as a result. And on the topic: where *is* my nomu?” Hisashi can see the muscles of Tomura’s jaw twitch as the boy grinds his teeth.

“I don’t know. Gone. All Might blasted him away with one of those ridiculous overpowered smashes of his. Kurogiri might be able to locate him, but–”

“With your brother injured, Kurogiri has more important things to occupy his time. We’ll write it off as another loss, then. A shame, given all the time and effort that went into creating it, but I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“We were close,” Tomura says at a whisper. “*So close.* Nomu almost had him.”

“What’s the saying again? Right. *Close* only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

Curiously, Tomura doesn’t shrink from the scorn like he normally would. “Hand grenades,” he says instead, barking a hoarse laugh. “There were some close calls with those, too. Have you ever considered doing something about Bakugou Katsuki?”

Bakugou. There’s a name that Hisashi hasn’t heard for a while. When Izuku first moved in, he mentioned the family occasionally, but never with enough frequency for them to have occupied any space in Hisashi’s mind.

“Izuku’s friend from school? I can’t say I’ve considered him at all.”

Tomura laughs again. “Oh, they were never *friends*. I might have been able to kill All Might myself if the brat hadn’t gotten in the way. He’s a horrible kid, the absolute worst kind, and he’s got all that nastiness fixated on our little Izu.”

“Don’t try to blame your own shortcomings on others, Tomura. The obstacles you faced do not justify your failure, especially if those obstacles came in the form of a fifteen-year-old boy with a week of heroics training under his belt.”

“That’s not what I–”

“Learn from this. If you don’t want this whole exercise to have been entirely futile, figure out where you went wrong and ensure you don’t make the same mistakes in the future. Next time no number of professional heroes or *children* will be able to stop you. Next time, Tomura, you will show the world you are meant to be feared. You will become exactly the symbol we need. Do you understand?”

Tomura stares, eyes steely, jaw grinding back and forth, nails digging into his neck. Then, he nods.

“Yes, Sensei.”

“Good. Now, it’s time to start making a new plan. Consider gathering a team, elite people whose strength can become *your* strength. You’ve come far on your own, but no one can do everything alone. Even I have you, after all.

“Take all the time you need. It’s better to wait and secure your chances of success than rush ahead and make a fool of yourself – let this incident at the USJ pay testament to that. We’re in no rush.”

Today, tomorrow – it made little difference, in the end. Hisashi has been moving these pieces around for decades, carefully nudging them into place millimeter by painstaking millimeter. Sometimes you have to run before you can walk. Sometimes you have to fail before you succeed. Hisashi has weathered it all before. He’s sure he’ll see it all again.

Time, as curious and mercurial as it can be, is something he has in abundance, after all.

Chapter End Notes

CWs

USJ-related violence and injury. Specifically, Izuku gets shot, but it's not particularly graphic

(In a universe closely parallel to this one, AKA the outline)
Izuku and Tomura: *arguing, bickering, fighting each other instead of the heroes*
Kurogiri: So help me, I will turn this warp gate around

Commenters: Katsuki needs to pull his head out of his ass and realize that Izuku isn't the villain here
Katsuki: That sign won't stop me because I can't read!

Katsuki @ Izuku: I'm going to kill you
Tomura @ Katsuki: How fucking dare you, no one threatens Izuku but ME

(After the villains leave the USJ)
Mic: Did you just shoot a CHILD?!
Snipe: What? No, they were definitely a villain!
Mic: A villain CHILD?!?!
Snipe: No!!
Mic: They were the size of a CHILD?!?!?!
Snipe: It could have been a very small adult!!!

Next Chapter: Erasure - Part V (aka the FINAL part, I swear)
Update: Dec. 10

Edit: To clarify, the heroes arrived in the USJ just after Izuku throws Tomura through the portal. That's why Izuku is shot instead (though, like, c'mon Snipe, read the room)

Erasure - Part V

Chapter Notes

> CWs in end notes. Shit happens. Things always get worse before they get better.
>
> I nearly delayed this chapter because I started a new playthrough of Pokemon Omega Ruby and it has consumed my thoughts, they way things tend to do, but I made it! This chapter is a little less edited than usual as a result, but it should be fine.
>
> Without further ado, the finale of Erasure

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The most infuriating thing Katsuki has ever been made to do is sit aimlessly in a classroom immediately after a direct villain attack, told to be patient as the police methodically question each and every one of his classmates before allowing them all to go home. And sure, maybe it's important that the police and the heroes know what happened, but with all the adrenaline and anger and fear still coursing through his veins, Katsuki isn't exactly thrilled to be told to sit still and *wait*.

"Bakugou, are you *sure* you don't want to go to Recovery Girl?" Shitty Hair asks for at least the third time, mouth twisted up with something close enough to pity that it sends Katsuki's hackles rising.

"For the last goddamned time," he snaps, most likely *not* for the last time, given how persistent the extras in his class can be, "I'm fucking *fine*." His voice scrapes out of his throat rough and broken, as if to prove him wrong, but Katsuki swallows as if it doesn't hurt, and ignores the way Shitty Hair cringes in sympathy.

They are being questioned in seat order, and the police only just took away Round Face, Tail Boy, and Pikachu, so Katsuki is going to be forced to sit here, sedentary and smothered, for another half hour, at least. And that's if he's being fucking optimistic. Knowing how some of his classmates can babble, he's probably looking at longer. At least everyone in the classroom seems somewhat subdued, murmuring between each other in soft tones for the most part.

Of all the students, Katsuki is the only one with more than minor injuries – though even what he suffered is still far from *major*, as he

already told the teachers and the cops and the paramedics and everyone else who thought it was appropriate to look at him like some kind of wounded fucking animal. His throat is bruised and raw, his arms ache from overusing his quirk, and he popped a blood vessel in his eye at some point, but he's hardly on death's door. He's just *fucking fine*, for the information of all the people who won't stop fucking asking. He's not an invalid.

Besides, he was never in any real danger. He had the situation handled. And he definitely didn't need *goddamned Deku,* of all people, to protect him.

Katsuki breaths out hard through his nose and then stifles a cough as the air scrapes at the tender insides of his windpipe. Even just *thinking* about Deku makes his blood boil like mad, until he feels his skin is going to split if he doesn't relieve the pressure somehow. How was Deku even in Japan? He was meant to be in the US, far far away from Katsuki, causing problems for someone else. He was never supposed to come back. Katsuki was only ever supposed to have to think of him in past tense.

But no, of course not. Katsuki had finally gotten into UA and things couldn't just go nice and easy like they were supposed to. No, instead Deku shows up – clinging to villains, calling them by their first names, hiding behind them like a coward while they fight his battles. Crying, like he was scared or hurt, maybe, but still *there* – what the fuck was he *doing there?*

Shitty Hair is the next to go in for questioning and thank god for that. Without the persistent thorn in his side, Katsuki can shove his earbuds in and focus on breathing as well as he can, like his mother always insists. In through the nose – one, two, three, four; hold for seven; out through the mouth – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

Katsuki hates the shitty breathing exercises. Mostly because they work, and the old hag is always smug about it. "Just breathe, brat," she says, like that'll fix all his problems. And maybe it *will*, but if she would just stop causing him problems in the first place, then he wouldn't need to worry about his goddamned *breathing*, now would he?

Anger rises in him again, but this is the well-worn and familiar kind, which fits in his body as well as his bones do – the kind that makes him want to slam the door to his room into the wall, as opposed to wanting to slam his *fist* into some dumbass' *face*.

When an officer finally comes to retrieve Katsuki, he is as calm as he is going to get – which is to say, *perfectly* fucking calm and rational, thank you very much.

“I’m Detective Tsukauchi,” the man says after he leads Katsuki to a separate room. “Do you mind if I record this?”

“Go ahead.”

“Great. Can you state your name, for the record?”

“Bakugou Katsuki.”

“When did you notice the villain presence at the USJ?”

“Same time everyone else did. Portal opened up in the middle of the place and they all came pouring in. If there was any doubt the bastards weren’t supposed to be there, Hobo-Sensei cleared it up pretty fast.” The detective blinks a few times, silent for a moment as Katsuki crosses his arms over his chest and slumps further into his chair.

“Do you mean Aizawa?”

“Obviously.”

“Right. Can you tell me what happened next?”

“That warp gate asshole showed up, gave a little speech and scattered us.”

“The individual with the teleportation quirk – did you catch his name?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Katsuki bark, already fed up with the unimportant details. “Probably some stupid shit.”

“Moving on, then. Where did you end up after you were warped?”

“Collapse zone.”

“Were you alone?”

“I fucking wish. Shitty Hair was dropped in with me.” The detective pauses again, blinking like he has something in his eyes, looking like an absolute dumbass.

“‘Shitty Hair?’ Are you referring to Kirishima Eijiro?”

“Does he have shitty fucking hair?” More blinks from Detective Dumbass. “Obnoxious shade of red?” Katsuki prompts. “Spiky, but not in a cool way?” He makes a gesture to indicate horn-like spikes over his forehead.

“…That’s Kirishima. Did you encounter anyone else in the collapse zone?”

“A handful of no-name villains tried to get the jump on us, but I took care of them without any trouble.”

The questioning continues along a similar vein, dissecting every small move Katsuki made between the collapse zone and the plaza, grilling him for details on the battle he witnessed and the villains he encountered. Katsuki answers the questions almost reflexively, throwing forward information as the detective requests it, even if Katsuki doesn’t understand what half the questions are good for. After every statement Katsuki makes, the detective taps his finger against the table, loud in the silence between their words. Cheek leaned heavily against his fist, Katsuki glares at that tapping finger, growing more impatient with every word he speaks.

Then, “Does the name ‘Deku’ mean anything to you?”

Katsuki’s whole body grows hot and rigid. He opens his mouth to spit out a vicious answer, but the sharp edges of the words tear at his throat and send him into a coughing fit. Detective Dumbass pushes a glass of water across the table and Katsuki snatches it with a glare.

“Yeah,” he rasps after draining half the glass. “He’s a fucking villain, just like the rest of them.”

“Have you encountered him somewhere before the attack today?”

“We went to school together or whatever. When we were younger.”

“Is ‘Deku’ his legal name?”

“No.” Katsuki hesitates, then covers it under the guise of clearing his throat. “His name is Midoriya Izuku.”

“What’s his quirk?”

When Katsuki was four years old, he had made a promise to a woman

who was almost like a second mother to him. Her son had come into a very dangerous quirk that he had used against Katsuki, but Katsuki's Aunt had sat him down and made him promise that he would never tell anyone. And Katsuki never has, not even his own parents.

Partially, he didn't want to admit to anyone what Izuku had done to him. He didn't want that horror, that weakness, living in anyone's mind but his own. Even past that, though, he saw the necessity of the secret. Deku's quirk was a horrible and powerful thing, and if the wrong ears caught wind of it, Katsuki had no doubt that villains would come swoop the other boy up and make him into the stuff of nightmares. So, Katsuki kept quiet.

But there's no point to the secret, anymore. Deku is on the villains' side, now. Keeping the nature of his quirk quiet will only put people in danger if the thief is out there *using* it.

"Listen," Katsuki says, leaning over the table to get closer and keeping his voice quiet and serious. "I know it looks like that handsy guy was the one in charge, but he's not the one you've gotta worry about. It's Deku. There's always been something nasty about him. He *steals* quirks. He's not even supposed to be in the country, but if he's here, and with the villains, you've got a big fucking problem on your hands."

This time, the detective's long silence is punctuated by an intense, searching stare instead of those stupid blinks he was favoring earlier. He pins Katsuki beneath his eyes, looking him up and down.

"Steal quirks? Can you elaborate on that?"

"It's exactly what I fucking said. He takes quirks. Then he can use them, and *you can't.*"

"How do you know this? There are no quirks like that in the registry."

"Yeah, well he's obviously not in the goddamned registry, dumbass," Katsuki snaps. "Would *you* register a quirk like that? His papers say he's fucking Quirkless, but that's a lie. He stole my quirk when we were four fucking years old and I barely got it back, so I know what I'm talking about when it comes to that bastard."

This time, when the detective taps on the table, the sound is like a nail being driven into the lid of a coffin.

Every spike on the heart monitor drives into Shouta's head, twisting through one ear to the other in a jagged pulse of throbbing pain, like someone is winding a corkscrew through his brain. He hurts all over, but he refuses to let them raise the dosage on his pain relievers. It's bad enough that he needs to be drugged up at all – he absolutely refuses to become insensible with it.

"How is being delirious with pain better than being loopy on morphine?" Hizashi asks, voice even worse than the mechanical beeping that fills the room, even as he does his best to keep it low and soft.

"Morphine makes me stupid," Shouta grunts in response. His own words ricochet around his head like particularly vicious pinballs.

"Well, you seem pretty stupid to me, already." Shouta does not justify this with a response.

Shouta's eyes – along with the rest of his head and both his arms – are heavily bandaged, but the lack of sight does nothing to prevent him from noticing as the doctor enters the room. Even the small noises of the door opening and the doctor walking in lick along his sense like fire.

"Eraserhead," the doctor greets, voice considerately soft at barely a whisper but no more bearable for the effort. "It's good to see you awake."

A plastic clipboard clicks against the hospital bed's frame as the doctor retrieves his chart and papers rustle as she flips through it.

"What's the verdict?" he asks. Hizashi has filled him in on the most important bits – namely that Shouta is absolutely fucked up, so much so that the other teachers briefly feared he was dead when they arrived at the USJ – but Shouta suspects he's lacking some of the finer details.

"Well, you've probably noticed the broken arms," the doctor says, with a dry humor that Shouta can appreciate. "Comminuted fractures in both of them. The bones of your left elbow were practically pulverized, and while we've reconstructed everything, you'll still need to do some physical therapy to ensure that you keep your full range of motion. It's likely you'll have some long-term pain, even after you've

fully healed, but the physical therapy can help with that, so long as you *do it*."

Her stern tone leaves no doubt that she has dealt with more than her fair share of difficult hero patients – the kind who never put the proper effort into their recovery because of their hurry to be back in the field, and then wonder why their field performance is declining. Shouta can't say he blames them, understanding the need for action and the hatred for the monotonous and exhausting routine of physical therapy. Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how bitter Shouta is feeling at any given moment – he has Hizashi, who will ensure that Shouta is taken care of, by force if necessary.

"The muscle of your right elbow was heavily damaged when you arrived, but thankfully we have a quirk user on staff who specializes in soft tissue regeneration. You'll have a nasty scar, but I don't suppose you'll have many complaints about that, given your choice of profession.

"Our biggest concern was the head trauma. Now that you're awake and talking we can rule out brain damage, thankfully, but you've still got a facial fracture to contend with and your orbital floor was shattered."

"What does that mean?" Shouta asks. Orbital means eyes – he might not be a doctor, but he knows that much – and the potential implications have Shouta stiffening unconsciously. By his side, Hizashi is tellingly silent. Shouta can't even hear him breathing.

"We can't say for sure yet," the doctor says, apology leaking into her professional tone. "We've ruled out the possibility of blindness, but it is possible your eyes will suffer from other aftereffects. Given the nature of your quirk and the extent of the damage, it's possible you quirk will be affected, as well."

"When will we know?" Hizashi asks, speaking up when Shouta stays silent. With both of Shouta's arms in casts, Hizashi closes a hand around his ankle instead. Hizashi squeezes gently, his touch aching against Shouta's sore body, but warm and grounding.

"When we remove the bandages, we can test–"

"Can we do that now?" Shouta interrupts.

"I wouldn't recommend it."

“Sho,” Hizashi scolds. “You’re being held together with scotch tape and glue right now. Let yourself heal before you start pushing your limits again.”

“I’m not trying to push them. I’m trying to identify them. It’s different. Is it possible to test it now?”

“Technically, yes,” the doctor grudgingly reveals. “However, your condition is still fragile enough that you risk worsening it by trying to activate your quirk so soon. I do *not* advise this.”

“Will it kill me?”

The doctor sighs. “No. But exposing your eyes at this point *will* hurt, I can guarantee you that.” If Shouta could smile beneath all the bandages and whatever is holding his face together, he would.

“That’s fine,” he says. “I’m a pro hero. We’re accustomed to pain.”

“Where’s Father?” Tomura demands to know, shortly after Izuku wakes.

“Father?” Izuku asks, still somewhat bleary with exhaustion after the fight and subsequent healing that had him unconscious for nearly an entire day. “Do you mean All for One?”

“No!” Tomura responds sharply, grimacing and flushing red. “I mean *Father*. You took him from me before you threw me through the portal, you brat. And then you got yourself *shot*.” The last bit is tacked on with a pointed narrowing of the eyes and Izuku knows Tomura will be clinging to the incident for ages. “Where is he?”

Right. The severed hand. Tomura had removed it after Katsuki spit in his face, and then Izuku had taken it from him in a bid for his attention. But then Katsuki had attacked Izuku, and Tomura had nearly killed him, and Izuku had gotten shot. What had he done with the hand? An uncomfortable squirming starts up in his stomach and he stares at Tomura with wide eyes.

“I don’t know,” Izuku forces himself to admit, pushing the words out of numb lips.

"…What?"

"I – I don't know. I swear I didn't mean to, but at some point, in the chaos, or when the heroes arrived I – oh my god, I must have dropped it. I'm so sorry, Tomura, I –"

"You lost him?" Tomura's voice is calm compared to Izuku's frantic rambling, but that's more concerning than if he had been yelling.

"…Yeah."

"You–" Tomura cuts himself off with a growl, lips curling away from his teeth as his whole expression twitches.

During Izuku's bought of unconsciousness, Tomura has done nothing to care for the gouges he clawed into his neck at the USJ, and now he reaches up and tears into their sore-looking edges without a second thought. Izuku flinches internally but knows it would be counter-productive to try to intervene, given that he's the current cause of Tomura's distress. Tomura sways in place, making low inarticulate noises of frustration under his breath. Then, he turns on his heel and leaves the room, moving stiffly. For a moment, he closes his hand around the doorframe, allowing all five of his fingers to connect in his agitation. Even the brief contact leaves finger-shaped grooves of blacked wood behind.

Izuku makes no attempts to stop him. It is rare that Tomura gets upset enough to remove himself from a situation, but on the occasion that he does, it is certainly safer to simply allow him to leave, as much as it may hurt to watch him go.

Sometimes, it seems like every choice Izuku makes ends up being a bad one – even ones that seem arbitrary at the time, like taking Tomura's so-called "Father." Whenever he does *anything*, people seem to wind up hurt. He's tried a million things to circumvent it, but nothing ever works for more than a moment, and then he is back to hurting people again, just like always.

Hurting Tomura is the worst of all. Izuku hates to do it.

And yet.

And yet, here Izuku is, thinking about doing the worst thing he possible could.

His insides are already clenching with guilt just because of the hand.

He knows how important the macabre accessories are to Tomura, "Father" especially, and no matter how much it disturbed Izuku personally, he never intended to *lose* it.

If he feels like this after accidentally losing something important to Tomura, how is Izuku ever meant to *intentionally* destroy his brother's *entire world?*

Sometimes, it seems like every choice Izuku makes is wrong. It's like he's built for regret, no matter what he does.

Late at night, guilt covered by the dark, he sometimes wonders if maybe it's not the choices he *makes*, but the choices he *has*.

Now is a perfect example, isn't it? There are two options in front of him, and Izuku isn't sure either of them are good. A certainty churns in Izuku's chest, dreadful and inevitable, that he is going to regret whatever it is he does next. The feeling is heavy and unbalancing, threatening to tip him over at any moment. Izuku almost wants to let it. He wants to lie down and let it crush him, or better yet, sleep forever so it can never catch him.

But he only has two choices, and that is not one of them.

He can keep going as he has been. He will hurt more people and every day he will hate himself more. Day by day and week by week, he will feel colder and colder inside, until his bones become brittle with frost, and he shatters into a million pieces.

Or Izuku will kill his father. And that will likely shatter him anyway.

He can keep going as he has been, and so will Tomura. They will both keep going, and maybe the way they have been isn't a good way to be, but they will be together.

Or Izuku will kill his father.

And then Tomura will probably kill him.

It hurts to even think about because Izuku knows just how upset Tomura would be, just how betrayed he would feel, and Tomura is the last person Izuku ever wants to hurt. But without All for One, Tomura would have a *chance*. Izuku isn't sure for what, exactly. A chance to make something of himself, maybe. A chance for Tomura to finally make something of *himself*, instead of simply being what *All for One* has made him to be.

Izuku has a day and a half to decide.

Tomorrow, he and All for One are supposed to visit the warehouse, and that will be Izuku's best and only chance to do the job, if he so chooses. He can't afford to wait any longer. As far as he knows, Eraserhead is still alive, and while Izuku is wholeheartedly grateful for that, it also means that it's only a matter of time until the man realizes he can no longer use his quirk. The hero may not realize exactly what that means, but the information would undoubtedly make its way to All for One's ears, and he would make the connection in an instant and then take the proper precautions to ensure that Izuku's new quirk couldn't be used against him, just like he has with all the ones he has already had Izuku take.

All this conflict, all this struggle, and he can't even be sure that it will work. He's still operating on the largely unsupported assumptions that Erasure is capable of erasing multiple quirks and that Izuku's father cannot survive even a brief period without the many quirks he has collected to extend his life and compensate for his injury.

And then there is the even bigger assumption that *Izuku* is even capable of doing what he is asking himself to do.

He lies back in his bed, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees burst of bright colors behind his closed lids.

He is writing his own story, now.

It is far harder than Aizawa Shouta made it look.

The solemn air that fell over class 1-A is gone two days later when classes resume. Katsuki's classmates can't stop gushing about the news coverage and how amazing All Might was, and the extras in the other courses keep shooting the class side-long glances, like they think they're being discrete, whispering behind their hands as if that does a damned thing to stop their words from leaking into the air around them.

With a livid halo of blue and purple circling his throat, Katsuki is stared at most of all. Everyone is all wide-eyed, a mix of morbid curiosity, awe, and fear written clearly across their faces because they

don't know how to mind their own fucking business or even hide their goddamned nosiness.

Everyone acts like something special happened. Sure, the villains got into UA, and that was admittedly pretty fucking unheard of, but as for class 1-A's role in all that? They fought the villains off – or at least, *some* of them did, while others were entirely useless – but they are training to be heroes, and that's what heroes *do.* There's nothing impressive about doing what you're meant to.

Which is also why Katsuki isn't screaming about how he's going to put his all into the sports festival. Sure as shit, he's excited as all hell for the event, but it goes without saying that he's going to do his best. Hell, he's going to do *the* best. Why would he bother with anything less?

But, Katsuki supposes as Round Face lets out another intense cheer, at least the extras are too occupied with that whole business to keep bothering him. Shitty Hair especially has been up his ass all day, concerned about his health or whatever other pussy bullshit and, worst of all, asking persistent questions about *Deku*, whose existence Katsuki would much rather go back to ignoring.

At the end of the day, when Round Face slides the classroom doors open so they can all make their way home, Katsuki is one of the only people not surprised at the crowd waiting for them, packed in tight to the hallway.

"What business do you have with class A?" Glasses asks too loudly and with too much emphasis, chopping robotically at the air while Round Face stutters in surprise.

"Scouting out the enemy, Robo Nerd." Said nerd gapes in offense, jaw moving just as mechanically as the rest of him as he wordlessly works his mouth open and closed. "We're the ones who made it out of the villains' attack. They probably want to check us out before the sports festival, see what we're made of. There's no point in doing shit like that." He stands in front of the crowd, scanning his eyes over a sea of unremarkable people who stare back with mixes of defiance, offense, and nervousness. "Out of my way, extras."

"Stop calling people 'extras' just because you don't know them!" Glasses scolds. Katsuki considers it, then summarily discards the suggestion. If people don't want to be extras, they should do a single goddamned thing to stand out, and then Katsuki would bother with

giving them a proper nickname. Besides, a decent number of people actually shuffled to the side at Katsuki's command, so Glasses can hardly say Katsuki's wrong when they're actually responding to the address.

One person takes advantage of the new gaps in the crowd, weaving through the spaces without hardly touching anyone at all. He's tall – taller than Katsuki, but Katsuki's not so delicate that shit like that hurts his ego – with purple hair that sticks straight out in a mess of waves, bag under his eyes large enough that he'd have to pay extra to take them on a plane.

"I came to see what class A was like, but you seem pretty arrogant," he says, voice droll and lacking any hint of the nervousness that Katsuki spotted in the eyes of so many of the extras in the crowd. "Are all students in the hero course like this?"

"Hah?" Katsuki asks, curling his lip into a sneer. Zombie Eyes – who didn't bother to introduce himself, not that Katsuki cares about his name or would have remembered it in the first place – rubs at the back of his neck and glances to the side with an unintimidated sigh.

"I'm a little disillusioned. There're quite a few people who enrolled in general education or the other courses because they didn't make it into the hero course. Did you know that?" Katsuki neither knew nor cared. The problems of some second-rate losers who couldn't make the cut weren't something he cared to bother himself with, but Zombie Eyes keeps going.

"But the entrance exam isn't our only chance, you know? Depending on the result of the sports festival, a student can be transferred between courses. A gen-ed student can become a hero student. A hero student can become a gen-ed one.

"'Scouting out the enemy?' Personally, I just came here to say that, if you're not careful, I'll sweep your feet right out from under you, hero course or not. I came with a declaration of war."

Dark eyes with pale pupils lock onto Katsuki's in undisguised challenge. Katsuki rises to it, staring back with his eyes slightly narrowed, mouth set in a grim line that does nothing to phase Zombie Eyes' impassive air. The guy has guts, Katsuki will give him that. It's almost disappointing that he fell into general education, meaning he most likely lacks the skill or power to prove good on his words. Otherwise, it would almost be the kind of declaration Katsuki could

respect.

“Hey, hey!” some moron yells, popping out from the back of the crowd. Katsuki only half turns his attention to the newcomer, then half quickly dwindles to nothing as he stares blankly towards the commotion.

“You ignorin’ me, bastard?!” the extra shouts as Katsuki turns to walk away. Katsuki doesn’t dignify the question with a response, since that would kind of defeat the purpose of – you know – fucking ignoring the guy.

“Wait a minute, Bakugou!” Shitty Hair shouts, dashing to Katsuki’s side and flailing an arm in a wide gesture to the crowd. “What are you gonna do about all this? Come on dude, it’s your fault everyone’s hating on us!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Katsuki grunts in response.

“Huh?!”

“It doesn’t matter as long as you rise to the top.”

The spiky bastard, rendered speechless by “manliness” or some shit, finally lets Katsuki pass and the crowd parts to allow him through. It’s a simple concept, if you ask Katsuki. You face challenges, you overcome them. None of that making nice bullshit people like to waste their time with. You get strong, you win. That’s what matters.

You do whatever you have to do.

And that’s that.

There is nothing wrong with an inquisitive mind.

That’s what Izuku’s father always says, anyway.

But Izuku’s inquisitiveness borders into dissection. He over thinks and over analyzes until he’s overwrought, burdened by questions whose answers he either doesn’t know or doesn’t *want* to know, but he can never stop himself from asking. The weight of his own inquisition pins him in place, and he stares into space and *wonders*.

He wonders if Tomura will ever forgive him. If Tomura will kill him. If Tomura will ever forgive *himself* if he does. He wonders who will take care of Tomura. If Kurogiri will stay. He wonders.

He wonders who his father will have him hurt next. How many people his father has hurt. How many quirks he has stolen. How many lives have been lost. How many families ruined. How many children left without their mothers.

He wonders if he is really going to do this.

Of all his questions, this is the only one Izuku can even begin to answer.

Is he really going to do this?

Well. It needs to be done. And Izuku is the only one who can do it.

It's not a good answer, Izuku acknowledges to himself as he packs some of his belongings into a backpack. It only half addresses the question, at best – a deflection instead of a direct response. Things that need to be done go ignored every day. They fall through the cracks, and it only becomes obvious that they needed doing at all in retrospect, when the consequences come to call. *This* particular task had likely needed doing for years, if not decades, but no one had done it yet, and it would be so, *so* easy to continue that trend of inaction.

His mother's locket sits heavy against his neck. Normally, he would never wear it on a trip to the warehouse. Today, though, he has to bring it with him. If he does what needs doing, he won't get a chance to come back for it, and he won't risk leaving it behind, even if that means he ends up storing some bad memories.

That's what lockets do, after all. They hold memories. Once, Izuku's mother used it to store her memories of him, and now he uses it to store his memories of her. He has never wanted to risk tainting them. His mother was bright and good, maybe the only pure and untouched thing in Izuku's entire life, and he couldn't help but ask himself – what would she think of this memory? What would she think of what he has become? Would she still say that there is nothing wrong with him? That he is good?

More questions that Izuku will never have answers to.

Here is the most important question, one Izuku will know the answer to sooner rather than later, for better or for worse.

Not – *is* he going to do this.

But – *can* he do this in the first place?

No, Izuku acknowledges to himself as he slips the last of his analysis notebooks into his bag. His hands shake so badly the edges of the books catch against each other, corners bending and crumpling as he shoves them down. No, he doesn't think he can.

The things he has done – the lives he has been complicit in the loss of – already lurk on the edge of his every thought. Specters loom over his shoulders and clutch at the wayward edges of his bones, leeching all his warmth away. They swarm like rallying bees in the shadows behind his eyelids. He is already haunted.

How is he supposed to count his father among their numbers?

Because that is who he is plotting to kill. His father. Not a villain, not All for One – *Izuku's father.*

Sometimes, Izuku thinks there are two versions of Shigaraki Hisashi. One is his father and the other is All for One. One loves him; the other owns him.

For the past five years, Izuku has made this distinction. There is his father and there is All for One, separate entities that Izuku can feel entirely separate ways about, without the need for the cognitive dissonance that would rend him in half, otherwise.

Izuku loves his father. As for All for One – hate is far too strong a word, and it doesn't fit, anyway. It's not fear, either. Neither word encapsulates the dripping melancholy that Izuku associates with the man, the sadness weaved in to every interaction. Hate and fear say nothing of the yearning that leaves a bitter taste beneath Izuku's tongue. It is something more akin to regret, maybe.

Shigaraki Hisashi, the father, who Izuku loves. Shigaraki Hisashi, All for One, who Izuku *regrets*.

Izuku tells himself they are different.

They are not.

"Are you ready to go?" asks Shigaraki Hisashi, the man who is both Izuku's loving father and All for One, the villain who treats him like an object, a tool, a weapon.

His father who loves him; All for One who owns him. All for One who is his father and his father who is All for One.

Does his father own him?

Does All for One love him?

Was Izuku ever loved at all?

There he goes again, asking too many questions for his own good. He stares at his father's face, at the metal plating that covers All for One's eyes, at the scars that trail down his father's cheeks, at the way All for One's mouth ticks up slightly at one corner, his father's gentle smile. The love and regret threaten to drown him. It's an odd feeling, to mourn someone not yet dead but simultaneously long lost. Izuku swallows hard, turning his eyes to the ground to hide his rapid blinking under his hair.

"Yes," Izuku finally replies, stepping to his father's side. His father doesn't even spare the bag slung across one of Izuku's shoulders a glance. Quirk analysis is part of what they do at the warehouse, after all, so Izuku's notebooks are a common accessory to their time there.

All for One, as clever as he lauds himself to be, has no idea what's coming to him.

Whether it's trust or arrogance, the obliviousness makes Izuku ill. The whole situation makes him feel like he's going to be sick, even though he's barely eaten a thing since he woke up the day before.

He wants to be sick. He wants to cry. He wants to curl up in a small, dark space and pretend he doesn't exist.

Instead, he takes all those feelings, balls them up, and swallows them down. They settle in his stomach as heavy and dense as a neutron star, but the persistent stinging behind Izuku's eyes fades and he can finally take a deep breath without feeling like his lungs are being crushed.

Izuku has never used this quirk before. He has never wanted to. He has many quirks that he has never wanted to use, preferring to focus his limited time and energy on extensively training a reliable and versatile few, but this specific quirk has been deliberately and pointedly ignored. He has never wanted to use it; he has *wanted* to *never* use it.

Of course, his past compunctions don't really bother him, now.

Nothing does. That's what the quirk is for.

He still *knows* what he's feeling. The emotions are all still there. But they're stored inside that dark, collapsed star in the center of his gut, unable to bother him any further. It's an interesting change of pace for Izuku – who is almost always overwhelmed when left to his own devices – and a necessary intervention if he wants any hope of completing his task.

After all, with his emotions intact, Izuku couldn't even watch Tomura try to harm a boy he hadn't been friends with in over a decade without having a breakdown. Imagine the state he would be in, if he tried to kill his own father in cold blood. Izuku simply wouldn't be able to do it. He would collapse beneath the weight of his own guilt and grief.

As it is, he does not cry or shake or wheeze as he and his father step into the warehouse, the portal leading them directly into the lab, like it does almost every week. Laying eyes on the nomu or the people and parts of people that will become nomu normally fills Izuku with disgust and remorse, but today is not a normal day.

Part of Izuku wants to ask questions. He's always endlessly questioning things, and there are so many things he could ask his father. Things like *why* and *what next* and *will it ever end*. That part of Izuku wants to *talk*. It wants – so very, very badly – to *understand.* And it hopes – with an acknowledged futility that does nothing to dull the sharp edge of desperation – to *prevent*.

But that part of Izuku is neatly quarantined with his other emotions, all caught and contained by their own gravity, nothing more than footnotes on Izuku's thoughts.

Rationally, there is no need to ask questions that won't get proper answers. There is no reason to waste incredibly limited time catering to sentiment when there are matters of life and death that need handling.

Erasure is activated with a complete lack of fanfare.

Izuku's father, facing away from him, halfway through the beginning of a sentence Izuku paid no attention to, stumbles. He lurches an arm out, grabbing the edge of one of many steel tables so hard his knuckles turn white. The tendons on the back of his hand stand out in harsh relief under the unforgiving florescence lights of the lab. All for One's head rotates in Izuku's direction, though the movement is less

precise than usual, blind and undirected in the sudden absence of all the quirks he usually uses to make up for the loss of his eyes.

“Izuku?” he asks, voice rasping and pained. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry.” The words sound flat to Izuku’s own ears, but he’s not lying. He *is* sorry, somewhere in that star, even if he can’t feel it right now. As soon as he releases the quirk, he is going to be so *incredibly* sorry.

“Izuku,” All for One repeats, voice simultaneously weaker and more stern. “What are you doing?”

“What needs to be done.”

“You don’t need to do this. You can still stop. Let me go, tell me what’s wrong, and then we can fix it.”

“We can’t,” Izuku says. “We can’t fix it. They’re dead.” The words should be sobbed, Izuku is aware. But if he was crying, Erasure would likely deactivate, so it’s for the best that he can’t.

“What does killing me solve? I’ll just be another body on your conscious.”

“It’s not about me. You’re the villain in a lot of stories, Dad. I want to see more happy endings.”

There are no heroes in Izuku’s story. Only different types of villains.

But – there is a hope in Izuku, bright and sharp, that some of them may be able to be redeemed. All for One is not one of them. Izuku most likely isn’t, either. But Tomura – maybe he could be. So, Izuku will make this choice, will make this sacrifice, and maybe in the process he will be able to save the one person in his life who needs it most.

His father’s knees buckle. The table screeches a couple of inches across the floor as All for One uses it to catch his weight and guide his fall. Izuku’s eyes are starting to burn. He had hoped this would be faster. If he blinks before it’s over, he’ll never get another chance, but at the rate things are going Izuku won’t be able to hold out.

He wanted this to be quick and merciful and passive. Those were all things he *needed* it to be, when he was building scenarios in his head trying to decide what course of action he was going to take. Now, he

just needs it to be over.

What is the best way to kill someone? Of all the questions Izuku has asked, all the wonderings that keep him up at night, he has never much thought about how to best commit murder. He wishes he had dedicated more thought to it earlier.

What is the best way to kill someone? In their sleep, he supposes. That's how most people want to die, isn't it?

There is a song that Izuku's father sings to him whenever Izuku gets particularly upset. There are no words, only melody. Even that is broken into bits and pieces, eroded by all the years between now and his father's own childhood. But Izuku has always loved the song, and he hums it now, letting the notes of it – soft, soothing, and slightly sad – twine through his father's ears.

Lullaby is another of Izuku's relatively old quirks. Before he had Izuku take it, All for One made sure to have a quirk of his own to prevent himself from being put to sleep, but it was of no help to him, now. After only a couple of bars, Izuku's father can no longer fight unconsciousness.

What is the best way to kill someone? Fast, Izuku thinks.

There is a scalpel on the table Izuku's father collapsed against. Izuku picks it up and turns it over between his fingers. The metal is cold and the shape is foreign. He doesn't know how he's meant to hold it. But he knows which end is the sharp one, which is arguably all he needs.

This is how it's always done in the movies. One broad cut and it's over. It's fast. Blood loss isn't supposed to be painful, Izuku doesn't think. You get cold and tired and then you fall asleep. And his father is already asleep, so this is the best way. Or at least, the best way Izuku can think of.

Whenever Tomura made Izuku watch any of those really bloody horror movies, Izuku always thought they exaggerated. Blood doesn't *spray* like that, he thought. It's just camp. Fun with special effects.

There is nothing *fun* about how *hot* fresh blood feels against your skin.

It is thick and slippery and it smells.

But Izuku stays next to his father until the puddle stops growing.

Then, he stands. There are still more things that need doing, and he has limited time to do them.

At the bottom of his stomach, the dark star of Izuku's swallowed emotions *screams*.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
Character death - Izuku kills his father. He erases his quirks, puts him to sleep, and then slits his throat. It's not all the graphic, all things considered, but yikes.
Dissociation - Izuku uses a quirk to literally suppress all his emotions, which is in NO WAY healthy. Unhealthy coping mechanism abound.

AFO: My parenting books did not prepare me for patricide

Izuku: I'll keep all my emotions right here
Izuku: And then someday
Izuku: I'll die :)

Me: So this chapter will have a quick check in with Bakugou and Aizawa, and then the main event
My brain: You know what else happens around the same time? Shinsou's first appearance.
Me: Yeah, but that would kind of interrupt the flow of everything -
My brain: But consider: Hitoshi.
Me: omg you're so right

Next Chapter: Lie Detection (Part I? Probably.)
Update: Dec 17

Lie Detection - Part I

Chapter Notes

CWs in end notes

I will not even attempt to guess how long Lie Detection is going to be. Actually – I can say with reasonable confidence that it will be shorter than Erasure. But that's all, I dare not be more exact.

Also! I made a discord! I meant to do that for last chapter, so everyone could scream together, but… pokemon. At the moment, the server is literally entirely empty because I made it all of five minutes ago and - I cannot stress this enough - I have NO idea what I'm doing. But at least it exists? I dunno.
Feel free to come hang and help me figure it out!
Click here to join!
(Hopefully that works, but again, I'm clueless, so this may be dead in the water)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Standing before the gates of UA would evoke a strange combination of emotions in Izuku, if he were able to feel anything. As it is, he can't even sense the awe, yearning, or bitter disappointment in the dense mass of repressed emotions that sits in his stomach. The conflicting things that Izuku knows he should be feeling are too drowned out by the buildup of guilt and grief and *horror*.

Instead, Izuku simply stares at the gate and the building beyond it. Towering, imposing things that are incapable of intimidating him. His eyes slide around the edges of the gate until they land on a camera, a small glassy glint amidst the stone that Izuku likely wouldn't have been able to spot if he hadn't been trained to. There is someone on the other end of it, watching him, he's sure.

Izuku doesn't look dangerous, like this. Looking at him now, no one would guess that two hours ago he was covered in the blood of his own father. He had stripped himself down under the staring but unseeing eyes of half a dozen nomu and climbed into the large stainless-steel sink in the back corner of the lab. He had sat, shivering beneath a torrent of freezing water, and scrubbed at his skin with his nails until the water that swirled down the drain finally ran clear. He had tossed his clothes into a stiff, heavy pile that sprayed blood onto

the concrete and scrounged through the cabinets against the walls until he found something else to wear. Everything in the lab was too big for him – which was inconvenient, though for the best, if Izuku considered the implications – but he had made it work. Now, he was dressed in soft blue pants with an elastic waistband and a drawstring that made them perfectly adjustable and a large yellow hoodie with a rabbit on the front, hanging down to his thighs and covering his hands that still had blood dried under the nails. He couldn't find a change of shoes, but he had wiped the blood from the white soles of the ones he usually wore with a spare T-shirt and ignored the slightly damp squelch of them beneath his toes.

Izuku just looks like some lazy teenager who threw on some longue clothes before going on an errand. It probably looks like he stopped on his way to gape at the most notorious school in the country, like countless people doubtlessly do on the daily.

"Hello," Izuku calls to the camera. "Can I have a moment of your time? It's important."

He stares at the small reflection of the lens, shifting from foot to foot. He doesn't know the right thing to say here, to gain anyone's consideration. Beyond the gate, the building towers silent and still, students having gone home around an hour prior.

"I need to see Eraserhead," Izuku says, because that is why he is here.

Nothing changes. The camera is inscrutable. The building is unmoved. Izuku knows there is someone on the other side, watching and listening, but how is he meant to know whether or not they are *hearing* him? There are things he doesn't want to say here, out in the open like this.

"I don't have much time."

The star in Izuku's stomach is an unstable thing. It pulses and writhes. It does not *bother* him – it can not bother him – but he knows that it is going to become a problem relatively soon. The quirk can only be used for five hours, maximum, and Izuku has already had it on for two. Combine that inherent limitation with the limits of Izuku's *own* quirk – namely that it takes time and practice for him to build stamina with each individual quirk he has, time and practice which he has not devoted to this particular quirk in the slightest – and he isn't sure how much longer he can hold this. He also isn't sure exactly what the fallout will be when the quirk finally fails, but he's certain it will be

debilitating. If he is not able to return Erasure before then, he may not get another chance.

“It’s about his quirk.”

Finally, there is movement. Whether this is the statement that gains Izuku the heroes’ attention or whether he has had it all along, he neither knows nor cares. For the moment, Izuku can’t see anyone, but someone moves into the radius of his quirk awareness, creeping around behind him. There’s another person somewhere to the side. Snipe and Midnight, if Izuku had to guess. A moment later, two figures enter Izuku’s field of view, approaching him directly from the building.

Three, Izuku corrects as they grow closer. An unassuming man the Izuku doesn’t recognize, the imposing form of Vlad King, and on top of the hero’s shoulder, a small, fury creature that Izuku would almost be tempted to call *cute*, if he didn’t know exactly who they were.

“Hello!” the principal of UA chirps in a cheerful greeting completely at odds with the grim looks on his companions’ faces. “Do you prefer Shigaraki or Midoriya?”

The question, abrupt and friendly, catches Izuku off guard. He is not particularly surprised that they know his name, either of them, given that Kurogiri called addressed him by one and Katsuki no doubt told them the other. But Izuku has not been called “Midoriya” in five years and he was not prepared for the way the star in his stomach seizes and spikes – sorrow and want and shame lashing out like malevolent little solar flares.

“Just call me Izuku,” is the best thing he can think to say.

“What are you doing here?” the nondescript man asks.

“I need to see Eraserhead.”

“Why?”

Lie detection, Izuku realizes. That’s the man’s quirk, or something along those lines, at least. Terribly convenient, but Izuku won’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

“I don’t mean any harm,” Izuku says, with complete honesty. “I just want to give back what I took. Can I come inside? I don’t have much time.” Izuku shift half a step forward and then stops in time with the

soft metal click of a gun being cocked behind him.

“Don’t move,” Snipe says.

“That won’t be necessary, Snipe,” Nedzu interrupts. “Open the gate for the boy, will you?”

There is only a moment of hesitation before Snipe follows the order – and it was an order, Izuku is sure, regardless of how it was phrased – slipping past Izuku to swipe his ID card against a scanner that sends the gate sliding slowly to the side. Besides Nedzu, the man with the lie detection quirk slips a pair of cuffs out from a pocket in the lining of his long coat. Izuku’s eyes catch on the glint of the metal, and he freezes even as Snipe crosses through the gate and Midnight emerges from her hiding spot to the side to follow him.

“You can’t put those on me,” Izuku says. There is a pulse of panic inside him, and while it is reserved enough that he does not *feel* it, it is strong enough that Izuku is forced to acknowledge it. The man narrows his eyes.

“It’s standard protocol.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone. But if you put those cuffs on me, I won’t be able to tell you anything.”

“Why not?”

“I’m using a quirk now. If it gets turned off, by me or you or anything else, I’ll experience the backlash, which will likely put me out of commission for an unknown amount of time.”

“What quirk?”

Of course a person with a quirk like lie detection would ask a lot of questions. Izuku can hardly begrudge the man that, given Izuku’s own inquisitive nature. But for every answer Izuku gives, there will be half a dozen new questions and Izuku doesn’t have time to fall down that rabbit hole right now.

“I will tell you everything I can. But only *after* I see Eraserhead.”

“You’re why he can’t use his quirk, aren’t you? It’s not his injury. You can give it back?”

Snipe, Midnight, and Vlad King all startle, blinking and trying to hide

their surprise as they stare at Izuku with confusion, holding themselves with a new level of caution and wariness. Nedzu merely smiles. Some of them knew, then, and some of them didn't. It made Izuku's goal easier, to not have to explain, so for now, he just ignored the rest.

"Yes. That's why I'm here. What hospital is he in? I understand if you'll need to escort me, but I need to see him to give it back." Izuku had hoped to return Erasure before the hero even had time to miss it, but that ship had sailed apparently. Later, perhaps, he would feel guilty for causing the hero any distress, but at the moment Izuku simply has a goal to meet and when that's done with, he'll have bigger things to feel guilty for.

"No need for that!" Nedzu chimes. "Eraserhead is right here on campus! Tsukauchi, put those cuffs away. Izuku is our guest." The principal's eyes gleam as the man, Tsukauchi, sighs.

"Nedzu, I can't just–"

"Of course you can! Police protocol might involve quirk suppressing cuffs, but hero protocol doesn't, and there are four pro heroes here, after all. Consider him under *my* custody instead of yours." Tsukauchi sighs again, a long-suffering gust that does nothing to dull the savage glint of amusement in Nedzu's eyes. Tsukauchi does not protest again.

"Now," the – Rat? Mouse? Stout? Chimera? – principal says, "Eraserhead should be with Recovery Girl. You said time was of the essence, yes? Then let's get going."

Tomura knows his brother.

Izuku who is terrible at video games but always happy to play them. He never gets upset when he loses. He'll let Tomura beat him over and over again and even when Tomura is being a particularly bad sport, Izuku will just roll his eyes and tolerate it.

Izuku who always gets on Tomura's case about self-care. He makes sure Tomura eats and sleeps and even fucking *moisturizes* and god forbid Tomura try to ignore him. Izuku gets even more insufferable when he's ignored, all petulant and snarky until Tomura is forced to

give in to the younger boy's wishes or risk going insane. But of course, the brat doesn't actually practice what he preaches; he doesn't take care of *himself*, so Tomura is forced to do it for him.

Izuku who is unbearably *good*. The kind of good that will forgive anyone anything. Except for himself, who's smallest wrong doings are elevated to unforgivable sins. Izuku is so *soft*. He always has been. In the beginning, Tomura had aimed with a spiteful viciousness to *toughen him up*, but Izuku had only ever grown hard towards himself, staying so pitifully, vulnerably soft towards the rest of the world. And at some point, Tomura had stopped wanting to change that. Izuku could stay soft. Tomura would do the hard things for them both.

Tomura stares at the scene in the lab with his eyes softly unfocused, seeing only blurs of color – red, so much *red* – instead of the full reality of the situation.

"Where's Izuku?" he asks flatly.

"He's gone," Kurogiri replies, soft and careful.

"Well, we need to find him, then. If he's been taken–"

"Shigaraki Tomura."

"*If he's been taken,* we need to find him. Get him back."

Izuku's clothes are piled in the corner next to the sink, soaked in blood and carelessly abandoned. His phone has been left with them, as well as the alert button – the one Tomura and Izuku were meant to take with them everywhere, so Kurogiri could always come and get them if they ever found themselves in trouble.

Tomura does not look at these abandoned things. He does not think too hard about what must have happened here.

"We need to find him," he repeats. Kurogiri remains silent.

Tomura knows his brother.

This was not his brother.

This was an enemy.

Everything is going to be fine.

Shouta has kept a mental tally of how many times Hizashi has said those exact words over the past two days. Seventeen. Twenty-nine, if he includes variants such as “we’re going to be okay,” and “it’ll be alright.”

Shouta knows Hizashi means well. The words are meant to be soothing, and they’re as much for Hizashi’s benefit as Shouta’s. Both of them are struggling with the idea that Shouta’s injuries may have permanently negated his quirk, but Hizashi is doing his best to stay supportive and positive.

But Shouta has never been a positive type of person. Hizashi is the optimist in their relationship while Shouta is the cold, hard realist. If, sometimes, that borders into pessimism, as Hizashi often insists it does, then that’s just a product of the fact that the world is so often a terrible place to live and there’s no use in pretending otherwise.

So, to Shouta, realist-arguably-pessimist, every utterance of “everything is going to be fine” only serves to emphasize the reality that here and now, in present tense, everything is very much *not* fine. Shouta cannot use his goddamned *quirk* and that is practically the antithesis of *fine*.

It’s not the end of the world. Shouta knows that, rationally. As much as their society orbits around quirks, they’re ultimately a very small part of who a person is and what they are capable of. Shouta is still Shouta, even without his quirk. He is still a teacher, still a hero, still a husband. He is exactly who he was before, only now he is unable to do a small thing that he is used to being able to do, a skill that everyone else gets by perfectly fine without. That’s all.

But also… Shouta has worked hard. He has worked so hard, fought tooth and nail, to make his quirk what it was, to make *himself* what he was. And now all that work is gone. Maybe he is still the same person, but how many others will see him as *less* now? How hard will he have to fight *again* to keep the respect he has already earned?

The doctor assured him that his situation may change with time, that he may simply be too injured to activate his quirk *at the moment*. Recovery Girl has echoed the sentiment. Yet Shouta can’t help but feel like fifteen years of hard-won progress is being ripped from his hands, like a rope tearing fast from grasping palms and leaving awful burns

in its wake.

“Just you wait,” Hizashi says, knocking a fist lightly against Shouta’s forehead with an audibly forced smile. “You’ll be right as rain in no time.”

That makes it an even thirty.

They are both done with their work for the day and are waiting for Shuzenji, who insists that Shouta needs to check in with her every day so she can keep track of his condition and administer small healing session to chip away at the damage done to him. She bustles into the room remarkably fast on those short legs of hers and lets out a loud *tsk* the moment she sets eyes on Shouta where he sits on a cot, back and shoulders supported against a pillow, but legs twisted to the side and hanging off the edge.

“You should be in the hospital,” she says, blunt and scolding.

“You said the same thing yesterday.”

“It was true then and it’s true now. You’re a stubborn fool, Shouta, and Nedzu doesn’t pay me nearly enough to deal with you.”

“Your salary is obscene.”

“Not. Nearly. Enough.”

Hizashi snickers to the side as Shuzenji begins with her slew of tests, inspecting Shouta none-too-gently. He glares behind the gauze that covers his eyes, though he doubts it would have any effect on her, even if she could see it. After years of dealing with bullheaded heroes and reckless children, Shuzenji is all but immune to nasty looks and words. It takes much more than that to shake her. In fact, if there’s anything that can, Shouta has not found it yet.

From where Hizashi watches the proceedings, perched on the edge of the bed, a phone chimes, a distinct noise that makes Shouta’s whole body rigid. If Shouta had his own phone he would have checked it instantaneously – a trained response to the tone that is set for all messages sent to UA staff that are flagged as “URGENT” – but Hizashi took his phone halfway through the day because Shouta kept trying to shift the bandages away from his eyes to squint at the screen. The bed shifts as Hizashi worms his cell from the pocket of his too-tight pants.

“What is it?” Shouta asks the moment Hizashi has had a second to

read whatever alert he has received.

“Nothing important.”

With a scowl, Shouta tries to sit up to extract more information from his husband – perhaps something properly useful, this time – but Shuzenji pushes him back into the pillows with the butt of her cane and a sharp click of her tongue.

“It’s nothing important,” she confirms. “Besides, even if Armageddon were descending upon the school, what exactly are you planning to do about it when you can hardly move, much less fight? Stay put.”

The words sting for how true they are. Shouta aches to *do something*, to be *useful*, but even if Hizashi and Shuzenji let him out of this bed, he wouldn’t be any good in a fight in this condition. It will be a while yet before he’s able to fight again, and even then, depending on what becomes of his quirk, he may never be able to operate like he used to. The burn of frustration and futility keep him silent for long minutes as Shuzenji continues her exam.

It is Nedzu that interrupts the silence, chiming in with a chirpy “knock, knock!” that is, of course, accompanied by no actual knock. “Shouta!” Nedzu exclaims, with his particular brand of malevolent cheerfulness that always sets Shouta’s hair on end. “You have a visitor!”

“Huh? Who the hell…?”

Shouta reaches for the bandages across his face, tugging at them as he searches blindly for where the wrap begins. He has no idea who could possibly want to see him and would warrant an escort from Nedzu, and he has no desire to deal with whatever mischief his boss is getting up to without even being able to see the rat. Shuzenji bats his hands away with another scornful click of her tongue, a familiar sound after all Shouta’s years as a student and coworker. Much more efficiently than Shouta could manage even with unimpeded sight, she unravels the bandages from his head.

“Let yourself adjust,” she scoffs when Shouta attempts to open his eyes immediately, only to slam them shut when light stabs like daggers into his unaccustomed pupils. Impatient, Shouta slits his eyes open, forcing them to adjust faster, despite the pain it invokes.

His vision is still slightly blurry, and everything is haloed by bright smears of hazy color. Each time he blinks, a little spike of pain shoots

from the back of his eyes straight into his brain, and there is a lingering ache even when he does nothing at all, but the sensations are manageable.

Nedzu stands in the doorway, along with Detective Tsukauchi, Midnight, Snipe, and –

“This is Izuku!” Nedzu says, gesturing a hand toward the kid next to him.

The boy is wearing soft, oversized clothes, which serve to make him look even smaller than he already is. With his figure being hidden by the clothes and the roundness of his freckled face, it’s hard to get a read on how old he is, but Shouta is certain the kid can’t be a day above sixteen, and that’s if he’s being generous. He has fluffy dark hair that sticks out at odd angles in a mass of shapeless curls and glints a bright green where the light catches it. His eyes, large and equally green, scan over the room, flitting between doors and windows and people before landing on Shouta with disconcerting focus.

Detective Tsukauchi, half a step behind, keeps his eyes fixed on the kid, intent and calculating. Nedzu’s gleeful introduction has already put Shouta on edge, and the way Tsukauchi looks at the boy just reaffirms to Shouta that there is more to this situation, more to the child, than is immediately obvious.

“Izuku, this is Eraserhead,” Nedzu introduces. Izuku does not look at him, eyes locked on Shouta. “But I suppose you already knew that!”

Izuku steps forward, out of the doorway and into the room. He moves deliberately, with purpose that sends alarm bells ringing in Shouta’s head as he scrambles for whatever pieces of information he is obviously missing. There is something about the kid that is horribly familiar, but Shouta can’t put his finger on what, which only serves to put him more on edge. Tsukauchi, Snipe, and Midnight all watch Izuku carefully, as if bracing themselves for whatever he may do next, while Nedzu looks back and forth between Shouta and Izuku with undisguised curiosity.

Izuku stops a polite distance from the bed and drops into a deep bow. Shouta blinks, hard enough that he regrets it. Then blinks again when the kid is still bent in half, formal and repentant for Shouta has no idea what.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku says in a voice that is soft and high-pitched, but

confident.

“Stand up,” Shouta orders, discomfort making the words blunt. Izuku does so. “I don’t know what you’re apologizing for.”

“Your quirk. I took it. I’m sorry.”

Shouta feels a bit like a computer that has blue screened.

“Excuse me. What?”

“Sorry,” the kid apologizes yet again. He frowns slightly, a small thing that breaks up the eerie smoothness of his features. “I’ve never had to explain this before. My quirk lets me take other people’s quirks. During the USJ attack, I took yours.”

Behind the kid, Snipe and Midnight shift uncomfortably. Tsukauchi’s gaze hardens. Nedzu smiles. At Shouta’s side, Hizashi chokes on a breath of air and then bends over towards his knees as he muffles his coughs. Shouta himself stares at the kid with eyes that sting for how wide they have gone, and while the words shake him – a quirk that can take other quirks, dear god – Shouta is more affected by the sudden wave of recognition that floods over him.

He remembers a foreign voice calling the name “Tomura,” practically sobbing it out with a desperation that went entirely dismissed. He remembers a small blur of green standing between one of his students and certain death. He remembers a child trying to reason with one of the most unreasonable men Shouta has ever had the displeasure of meeting, and he remembers the vague surprise when the child actually seemed to be *succeeding*.

And then, of course, Shouta remembers nothing, because he lost consciousness. After waking, he had heard some whispers about the strange boy who had been with the villains, but Shouta’s first concern had been with the wellbeing of his students, and then Hizashi had stopped him before he could get involved in the investigation, insisting Shouta focus on healing.

“Oh,” the kid says after the moment of silence has dragged on too long. “I’m here to return it. Sorry. I should have said that sooner.”

Never in his life has Shouta felt so wrong-footed. Surprise after surprise and he does not know how to process all this information, especially when it is still so full of gaps.

“Why?” Shouta asks, the first question he thinks.

“It’s not mine,” the kid answers simply.

“Then why did you take it?” There is an embarrassing edge of desperation to Shouta’s voice, but he is *confused* and trying to understand.

Thinking his quirk was gone had been simple. He knew what happened. He had overexerted himself, bitten off more than he could chew, and his injures had resulted in ocular damage that prevented him from activating his quirk, perhaps permanently. This burgeoning reality is so much more complicated and Shouta just wants to know *what happened*.

The kid bites his lip. “I didn’t *want* to take it. I know that doesn’t make it better, but it wasn’t a choice I made lightly. And I had hoped that I would be able to return it before you even realized it was gone. But I needed it.” He cuts his eyes over to Tsukauchi and meets the Detective’s cold gaze without cowering before looking back to Shouta. He half-reaches out a hand. “Can I give it back, before we get into why? The explanation might take a while.”

All Shouta can do is nod. Everyone watches Izuku approach the bed with varying degrees of surprise and trepidation, bar Nedzu who’s still wearing that inscrutable smile, no doubt scheming behind it.

“I need to touch you. Is that alright?”

Shouta nods again and the kid closes his hand gently around Shouta’s ankle. Hizashi hovers beside him, half protective and half hopeful. A few brief moments later, the time made to feel long by the tension saturating the room, and Izuku pulls his hand away, slumping slightly as he wobbles and catches himself on the metal frame of the bed’s footboard.

“Woah there,” Hizashi says, reaching for the kid on instinct but stopping short of touching him. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Izuku replies. “Just tired.” And the kid sounds it. He sounds the kind of tired that Shouta feels.

“Is that it?” Nedzu asks.

“Yep. I’m done. Erasure is back where it should be.”

“Shouta?” Nedzu checks, for confirmation.

The thing is, Shouta doesn’t feel any different. He couldn’t tell that his quirk was gone when he woke up in the hospital, and he can’t tell if it’s back, now. His eyes still hurt, just as they did before. His body aches.

So, Shouta does the only logical thing. Shuzenji is probably going to beat him upside the head with her cane for trying to use Erasure when his eyes are in the state they are, but the only way to know if he has it is to *use* it, so that’s what he does. Familiar, tingling heat flares in his temples as the quirk – *his* quirk, back where it belongs – comes to life. He holds it for barely a second before his eyes slam shut, reflexively retreating from the intense pain that sparked to life in his head the moment Erasure was activated. He hisses, pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead as Hizashi reaches out to cradle Shouta’s head in cool hands, rubbing soft, soothing circles into his temples. The pain is nothing compared to the relief.

“Shigaraki,” Tsukauchi says, speaking up for the first time. His tone is not what the cold calculation in his eyes would have led Shouta to expect. He sounds cautious, uncertain.

“Holy shit,” Snipe breathes from just beyond the doorway. “Is he okay?”

Hizashi’s hands stop moving. Shouta slits his eyes open.

Izuku still stands at the foot of the bed, but the disconcerting composure he has worn this entire time has cracked down the center. It’s not like how glass shatters – smooth and sharp and simple. The kid has cracked jagged and deep, like a fissure through the earth, a chasm so dark no one could even begin to guess how far down it goes.

His pupils have dilated to pinpricks, eyes so wide Shouta can see white all the way around the iris. He’s got one hand pressed over his mouth and the other wrapped around the base of his throat, both shaking badly as he digs his nails into his skin. There is blood dried into his cuticles and the creases of his knuckles

“Kid,” Shouta says, soft and careful, “you need to calm down.”

But his words do nothing to make Izuku’s eyes focus. He takes two steps backwards, trembling and uncoordinated, then the toe of one foot catches on the heel of the other and he tumbles to the ground. He makes no attempt to catch himself, falling in a heap. His breath

hitches. A whine builds in his throat, hardly audible.

“Midnight,” Shouta calls, and Nemuri, sensing his urgency, finally jolts into action.

She crosses the distance to the kid in a few, wide steps, pulling back the sleeve of her costume as she does. Pink mist wafts from her skin into Izuku’s face, and the beginnings of a scream die behind the boy’s teeth as he falls unconscious.

“Okay,” Hizashi says shakily into the sudden silence, “but what the fuck just happened?”

Let’s talk thermodynamics.

It’s all just theoretical, just a thought exercise.

Entropy reigns supreme. Everything trends towards disorder. What has been done cannot be undone.

He will never be a hero. He is the villain in his own story.

You can’t uncook an egg.

Do you push your father?

You can’t unslit a throat.

Once, Izuku had tried to kill his father, and afterwards, he cried for hours because he never should have tried in the first place.

There is a game.

This is real life. When people lose, they are *lost*. And they don’t come back.

You can’t win.

Because they are just pawns on a chessboard and losing them means little to the man playing the game.

You can't break even.

Sometimes, it seems like every choice Izuku makes is wrong. It's like he's built for regret, no matter what he does.

You can't even get out of the game.

There are no heroes in Izuku's story. Only different types of villains.

Oh no.

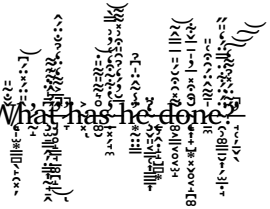
This is not real life, he tells himself. He's not actually here. Things like this don't really happen.

Oh no, no no no*nono*

He wishes this could be over already, he wishes this never happened in the first place, he wishes he was somewhere else, he wishes he didn't exist at all.

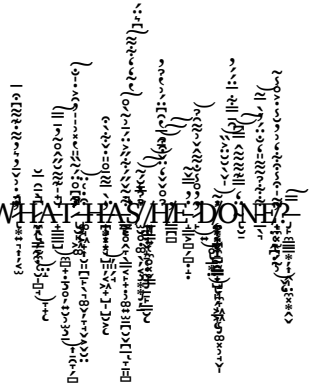
What has he done?

Once, Izuku would have gladly chosen being hurt over hurting someone else. He can no longer make that choice. He wishes he were stronger, but he has only gotten weaker.



“What’s my role here?”

“You are your father’s son.”



Chapter End Notes

CWs
Unhealthy coping/Dissociation – Izuku’s still got that quirk going There is also the associated breakdown when the quirk gets turned off

“There’s a game. You can’t win. You can’t break even. You can’t even get out of the game.” is Ginsberg’s theorem, which parodies the laws of thermodynamics. It seemed fitting.

Snipe: How old are you?
Izuku: Fifteen.
Snipe: …Dear god, I shot a toddler.
Mic: I TOLD YOU SO!

Tsukauchi: We have to suppress your quirk, it's protocol
Nedzu: It's not HERO protocol!
Tsukauchi: ...Am I a joke to you?

Next chapter: Lie Detection – Part II
Update: Dec. 24
Yes, that's Christmas eve, yes I'm updating anyway. Happy holidays, y'all.

Lie Detection - Part II

Chapter Notes

CWs in end notes

This part REALLY fought me, but I'm actually pretty happy with it, anyway.

Also -- IGG is two months old today! They grow up so fast :')

NOW for some fanart and memes, courtesy of the Discord!
Clap (AO3 here!): X X X X
Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X X X
Fola (AO3 here!): X
Lena: X X
Mantis: X X X X
And uh,,, a couple from me, too: X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tomura knows loss.

Once, he lost everything. He felt it fall apart beneath his fingers. He tried his best to hold on, but the touch of his hands brought distaster, and then Tomura was alone.

He knows loss. He knows the way it hollows you out. He knows how it feels to wonder why you are the only one left.

Once, Tomura *was* lost, but then he was found, and after that, everything was meant to be okay.

Now, he stares at the empty bookshelves in his brother's room. Bookshelves that are meant to be stuffed with journals that the brat guards better than his own life.

How do things disappear so quickly? Where do they go?

Where has Izuku gone?

It feels too much like loss. A helpless, whining feeling that Tomura was never supposed to have to feel again. But it's not. It's not loss. Tomura is not a crying child stuck on his own. He is a grown man with the power to change the world.

This is not loss.

This is *theft*.

It is Shuzenji, unshakable in the face of anything life throws at her, who moves into action, commanding the other heroes in the room with an easy authority that knocks them all out of their stunned trances.

“What are you waiting for!” she barks. “Someone get him up into a bed. No, not you Nemuri, you have no business trying to lift a teenaged boy on those heels of yours. Hizashi! Get over here, come on! I can hardly carry the boy myself!”

Hizashi practically leaps from Shouta’s side to do as he’s been told, bundling the kid up and scooping him off the floor in a single motion that looks far too easy, showing no sign of weight or strain from the body in his arms. He drops Izuku into the empty bed next to Shouta’s, carefully arranging the boy’s limbs into a comfortable position.

“Tsukauchi, you’ll tell me what you know about this boy. The rest of you, get out,” Shuzenji orders as soon as the kid is where she needs him. “Not you, Shouta,” she says when he makes to stand. “I still have to rebandage your eyes and make sure you didn’t do any damage with that little stunt of yours. Stay put. The *rest* of you – out!”

“Chiyo–” Nedzu begins, but she cuts him off with a single look.

“Yes, you.” It is a credit to Shuzenji that Nedzu makes for the door with merely a smile and shrug, no further argument, though Shouta is willing to bet just about anything that the scheming rodent will still be watching over the security cameras. The staff follows his lead easily, all except Hizashi who hesitates between the two beds, eyes lingering on Shouta. “You, too, Hizashi. The child doesn’t need you all hovering over him and your husband will be fine without you for half an hour. I am perfectly capable of doing my job *without* an audience, thank you very much.”

“Ah, right,” Hizashi agrees with a sheepish smile, rubbing the back of his neck. He pulls Shouta’s phone out of his jacket pocket and passes it over, Shouta taking it clumsily between stiff but thankfully not-casted

fingers. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll meet you in the lounge when you’re done, ‘kay?” Shouta nods tersely, and with one last glace, first at Shouta, then at the child in the next bed over, Hizashi leaves, softly tugging the door closed behind him.

Immediately, Shuzenji is attending to the kid, moving with the quick confidence that comes with the decades of work she has dedicated to her field.

“What can you tell me about him?” she asks as she scribbles a handful of measurements down on sheet of paper. She does not look up and Tsukauchi startles slightly where he stands in the corner of the room.

“Shigaraki Izuku, born Midoriya Izuku. Fifteen years old. A member of the League of Villains, seemingly with a degree of authority. He’s legally Quirkless, but recent developments would indicate otherwise. The exact extent and nature of his actual quirk are all unknown, but it includes the ability to steal the quirks of others.”

“Certainly not Quirkless,” Shuzenji mutters half to herself. “Can’t suffer from quirk exhaustion if you don’t have one to begin with. Do you have any idea what happened to him just now?”

“When he arrived, he mentioned having a quirk active. He wouldn’t say what it did, but he mentioned backlash if it were to be turned off. That’s why he wasn’t in cuffs.”

“Oh, is *that* why?” she asks, in a dry tone that makes Tsukauchi shift uncomfortably. “If I had to guess, it was some kind of emotion-based quirk. I know a panic attack when I see one, and the boy was far too composed when he came in. Emotion quirks tend to be nasty.” She sighs, attempting to wrangle the kid out of his hoodie but making little progress. Shouta moves to help her but sinks back into the cot when she levels a glare on him. “Tsukauchi, help me get this off him. I can’t look him over when he’s drowning in fabric.”

With Tsukauchi’s assistance, it is a simple matter to get the hoodie over the kid’s head, and Shouta can’t help but frown at what’s revealed. Izuku is small – and he looks smaller still when he’s pale and unconscious in an infirmary bed – but he is not skinny or emaciated in the way Shouta half-feared he would be. There’s a puckered scar in the hollow of the kid’s left shoulder, sore-looking and slightly red around the edges, but well healed, seeming weeks or even months old, rather than a short few days. Physically Izuku looks more or less fine – good, even. That’s not what pulls Shouta up short.

It's the blood.

The kid is covered in blood.

Admittedly, *covered* is a bit of an overstatement. Really, there's not much at all, but it's all over him. Dried into the creases of his elbow, the dip of his collar bones. There's a flaking smear along the side of his ribs, flecks over his hipbone. Perhaps Izuku is not covered in blood, but there's enough traces of it for Shouta to realize that, not too long ago, Izuku *was.* If the sharp intake of air is any indication, Tsukauchi has come to the same conclusion.

"It's not his," Shuzenji says as she prods lightly at the healing bullet wound.

"Who's is it, then?" Tsukauchi asks.

"How am I meant to know? I'm a doctor, not a wizard." Apparently, she has nothing more to say on the topic of how a teenaged boy could come to be covered in blood that is not his own, because she moves on with an easy shrug. "There's not much I can do for him. Other than the gunshot, which someone else has already done work on, his only issue is an intermediate case of quirk exhaustion. He'll be awake as soon as Nemuri's quirk wears off. For better or for worse. Get that sweatshirt back on him."

"How long will that take?" Tsukauchi asks, dutifully maneuvering the kid back into his clothes as Shuzenji whirls on Shouta, scoffing to herself about his eyes under her breath, low enough that Shouta can hear only enough of what she's saying to know he's being insulted.

"Half an hour, maximum."

Tsukauchi sighs to himself, hooking his ankle around a nearby chair to drag it closer to the bed. He sits and, after a moment, pulls a pair of cuffs out from his coat.

"You can't be serious," Shouta blurts, flat and unamused.

"Not you, too," Tsukauchi groans, tipping his head back with a long-suffering air that Shouta doesn't think he's entitled to. "It's *protocol*, Aizawa. I know heroes can play fast and loose with that, but it exists for a reason. I thought you appreciated that? He is an unknown factor with an incredibly dangerous – potentially *disastrous* – quirk."

"He's a kid."

“A kid who, at the very least, associates with villains.”

“He’s shown us nothing but good faith,” Shouta argues, ignoring Shuzenji even as she shines a light in his eye that is so bright he feels like his optic nerves have been set aflame. “He saved *multiple* lives at the USJ and delivered himself directly into hero custody to return my quirk.”

“He *stole* your quirk. He only needed to return it because he *stole* it. His role in the USJ incident is still unclear. We have no idea what his motives were. Not to mention the blood he has on him, now. He may be young, but that doesn’t mean he’s innocent. This isn’t one of your students, Aizawa.”

“There’s a thin line between cautious and callous.”

“And an equally thin one between sympathetic and sentimental.”

Shouta grits his teeth as Shuzenji wraps gauze back over his eyes. He listens carefully for Tsukauchi’s movements and the snick of handcuffs being tightened into place is unmistakable. As is Shuzenji’s soft, resigned sigh, though she doesn’t say a word against it.

Shouta recognizes the validity of Tsukauchi’s words, and that makes the situation all the more bitter. It is naïve to think that someone means well just because they are young. If years of teaching have taught Shouta anything it’s that teenagers are, in fact, some of the most spiteful and malevolent creatures on the planet. If the kid, Izuku, *does* mean them harm, in any way, for any reason, the cuffs are a vitally important tool. And if the kid’s intentions really *are* good, then cuffing him as a precaution does little to no damage in the long run. It is better to be safe than sorry.

But despite that, despite the truth and the logic, Shouta already *is* sorry. He’s sorry this kid who just had a meltdown brought about by god knows what is going to wake up handcuffed and surrounded by strangers who will be demanding answers the kid may or may not have.

“I want to be there when you question him,” Shouta says, a compromise with the pit in his stomach. There’s nothing he can do right now to make the situation better, but he can assure that it doesn’t get worse.

“You can’t.”

“Why not?” Shouta can hear Tsukauchi shift in his chair as the other man stalls for words. Shuzenji moves about the room with fast, light steps as she tidies up.

“It’s confidential.”

“Excuse me?” Shouta asks, baffled. Tsukauchi is a man obsessed with truth, and Shouta has not known him to lie, but the offered explanation is ridiculous. “I was *at* the USJ. The only reason I’m not part of the investigation myself is because Hizashi won’t let me get involved. I have clearance for this.”

“There’s… more to the situation,” Tsukauchi explains haltingly. “It’s not something I can get into, but if the boy is who I think he is, this goes beyond the USJ.”

“Is that supposed to make me give in? Because, if anything, I’m more curious that I already was.”

“Curiosity killed the cat.” Now, more than ever, Shouta curses the inability to roll his eyes. He hates that expression.

“Satisfaction brought it back,” he deadpans, hoping his tone can convey even an ounce of just how *unsatisfying* he finds this exchange. If Tsukauchi’s weary exhale is anything to go on, Shouta succeeds.

“That’s not – you can’t be there.” Tsukauchi says it strong and final, as if putting enough emphasis on the words will make Shouta care any more about them. It doesn’t. With one last clatter, Shuzenji exits the room, silently leaving the two men to their debate.

“You can’t question the kid alone. He’s a minor and you don’t have a guardian’s permission to speak with him.”

“He’s a *suspect*.”

“And it’s *protocol* to question suspects in pairs, to ensure they’re treated properly. I know how you love protocol.”

“All Might will be questioning him with me.”

“Yagi? What does he have to do with this?”

“It’s–”

“Let me guess: a national secret.”

“I was going to say confidential. That’s the official word.”

Shouta hisses an aggravated breath through his teeth. All Might and his secrets. The man is so obsessed with standing as a symbol that he has practically erased all evidence of himself as a *person*. Even the man’s *name* is a national secret. Shouta doesn’t even want to get into the whole deal with the man’s injury and his time limit and all those wild revelations Shouta and the rest of the staff at UA had been deemed worthy of when All Might joined their numbers.

“Wait,” Shouta says, realization dawning on him. “When you say ‘confidential,’ do you mean actually, *legally* confidential? Or do you mean confidential as in All Might wants to keep another secret? Because these are two very different things.”

Tsukauchi’s silence is answer enough.

Somehow, Izuku is surprised to wake up. Surprised and not exactly pleased.

The handcuffs are less surprising.

“Oh,” a blonde man with a gauntly thin face says, “he’s awake.”

He is. He wishes he wasn’t. Maybe he can go back to sleep. He wonders how long he could sleep for, if he really, really tried.

“Shigaraki,” says another man, this one with dark brown hair and features that are forgettable compared to his skeletal companion. Tsukauchi, Izuku recalls. The man with the lie detection quirk who met Izuku at the gates of UA. UA, where Izuku went after –

His breath catches. His arms jerk reflexively. The cuffs around his wrists jostle and the chain connecting them chimes, a bright metal sound that Izuku pours all of his focus into, shaking his hands to ensure silence doesn’t get a chance to fall.

“Shigaraki,” Tsukauchi repeats, his voice softer this time. “Are you alright? Do you need anything? Water, maybe?” Izuku shakes his head, jangles his wrists, keeps his eyes trained on the gleam of fluorescent lighting dancing over the silver. “Sorry about the cuffs. It’s

protocol." Someone scoffs.

"No," Izuku says, somehow simultaneously too breathy and starved for air. "I-it's fine. Um, b-better this way, p-pr-probably." He gasps a breath and chokes on it. His throat feels like it is full of cotton, leaving no room for things like oxygen or words.

"We have some questions for you, young man, if you would be willing to answer them for us," the blonde says, and Izuku nods robotically.

"Is it alright if I record this?" Tsukauchi asks, pulling a small, rectangular taping device from his coat. Izuku nods – he has not stopped nodding since the blonde man spoke. Tsukauchi hits a button on the devices side and sets it on the table next to the bed Izuku has been placed in. "Can you state your name for the record?"

"I-Izuku."

"Your full name, please."

Do you prefer Shigaraki or Midoriya?

Sorrow – want – shame.

Izuku has been *Shigaraki* for five years. And as much as he loved loves his father and Tomura, the entire time, he craved to be *Midoriya*. The name he was born with, his mother's name. But Midoriya Izuku had not done the things this Izuku has done.

What has been done cannot be undone.

"M-M-M–" Izuku swallows, painful for how tight his throat is, and tries again, forcing the syllables out even as his teeth try to bite them off. "Mid-Midoriya Izuk-ku." The way he says it does not sound like *Midoriya*, the warm and familiar name he has longed for. It's faltering and drawn out and he hates it.

Tsukauchi pauses, tapping his finger twice on the arm of his chair. The blonde man looks at that finger with a frown, and Izuku bites his cheek until he tastes iron.

"Is that your full, legal name?" Tsukauchi asks. His voice is carefully neutral, but Izuku's heart sinks. Two taps and heavy glances. A lie detection quirk. He squeezes his eyes shut.

"Y-yes," he says.

One tap.

Midoriya Izuku *is* Izuku's full legal name. That's the truth. But it's not really *his* anymore, is it? He lost it. Ruined it. Killed it.

Izuku chokes, tears welling against the tight seam of his eyelids, a burning pressure that builds relentlessly until it breaks, leaking down his face.

"Are you alright?" Tsukauchi asks again, his voice even softer this time. "We can do this later."

"I-I'm f-f-*fine*," Izuku insists. Tsukauchi does not tap at all, and Izuku is grateful not to be called on the lie. "We-we have to d-do this n-*now*."

"You said before that you don't have much time. What did you mean by that?"

"T-Tom-mura. And – and K-Kurogiri. They – They'll f-find me. S-soon."

"They don't know you're here?"

"N-no. I lef-left. Had to. To-Tomura, he – oh god."

Izuku bends forward, burying his face against his knees, cradling his cuffed hands against his chest, curling into that pulsing raw void that has opened up inside him. It pulls at him like a blackhole, tugging him until he's nothing but long, thin filaments. He's going to snap into pieces, and all those little fragments are going to be sucked into the engulfing abyss between his ribs, and then there will be nothing left of him. He wishes it would just *happen* already, instead of dragging out like this. Everyone knows that it is best to kill someone *quickly*.

He's like a dying plant, Izuku thinks hysterically.

Always *dying*. Never *dead.*

Izuku swears he means to laugh, but a sob comes out instead.

"Shig – Midoriya, you're alright. I need you to take a deep breath for me."

Izuku means to listen, he does. He's not trying to cause problems, but he just can't. Every time he tries to inhale, something stabs into his lungs and his throat clamps down and the air is too hot and wet, and he just can't, he can't. Izuku can't breathe and he can't see, and he is

finally going to die like this, pathetic, covered in snot and his father's blood.

"Hey there kiddo, I'm going to touch you, alright? I'm not going to hurt you, just touch you."

Izuku can't answer – he can barely understand what is being said to him, the words filtering through his head somehow wavy, like he's deep underwater. But the hands on Izuku are warm and solid and almost heavy enough to keep Izuku's soul pinned inside his body. The hands grab Izuku's and pull them forward until he can feel a steady heartbeat beneath his palms.

"Match my breathing."

Izuku is led through familiar cycles, ones he practiced with Tomura years ago before Tomura decided that breathing exercises were stupid and he wouldn't be humoring Izuku about them anymore. Izuku fumbles through the first few, breath stuttering and broken and off count, but each time, a gentle voice says, "good job, keep going," and Izuku does, and the next cycle is a little easier.

"And to think," someone says when Izuku is finally breathing easy enough that spots stop dancing in his vision, "you wanted to question him alone."

"Yes, Aizawa, thank you."

"Hizashi's the one who did all the work."

It takes a moment for the words to reach Izuku, but once they do, he jerks his head around so quickly his neck cricks, staring with horrified eyes at the man in the next bed over, gone unnoticed up to this point.

Aizawa Shouta.

Eraserhead.

Izuku hadn't been able to appreciate how terrible the hero looked when he first saw him. The only skin Izuku can see is the tips of the man's fingers, everything else covered by his clothes or swaths of bandages. After a day of sleep, Izuku had recovered almost entirely from the events of the USJ, but Eraserhead, even with access to some of the best healers in the country, still looked like he was on death's door. It is a miracle that Eraserhead is alive at all. No thanks to Izuku, who only watched as he was brutalized, who took advantage of the

hero's condition to *steal* from him.

"I'm sorry," Izuku blurts. He said it before, but he hadn't been able to mean it the way he needed to, then. "I t-took your quirk, I s-stole it! I'm *so sorry*, I–"

"Hey, hey, hey."

Izuku's hands, still in the grasp of another, still pressed against a steady heartbeat, are squeezed. Now that Izuku is listening better, the voice is familiar, if softer than he has ever heard it on the radio. Present Mic is sitting in front of him, smiling kindly, and how that managed to escape Izuku's attention is a testament to just how fragmented he feels.

"We just calmed you down kid," Eraserhead says while Izuku stares at the new hero in the room, the one sitting so close to him, the one *touching* him, as if Izuku couldn't take advantage of that contact to do horrible things. "Don't go getting yourself worked up again. You already apologized. Six times, now. Not that I'm counting."

Izuku blinks, off kilter and overwhelmed, caught on the edges of Present Mic's smile. It is such a soft expression, gentle and reassuring, *kind* in a way that Izuku doesn't deserve. These people have no idea what Izuku has done. They should look at him like Tsukauchi did when Izuku arrived – cold and guarded. He has tricked them, fooled them, lied to them without saying a word and lulled them all into a trap he didn't even mean to set.

"You said you stole Aizawa's quirk," the blonde man interjects – the stranger, not Present Mic, who is also very blonde and is still holding Izuku's hands in his. "How did you do that?"

Izuku tears himself away from Present Mic, pulling his eyes and hands away in the same movement as he turns to face the blonde stranger. He tucks his hands close to his chest, as if that will prevent him from hurting anyone.

It won't. Nothing will.

"It's what my quirk does," Izuku answers at a whisper.

"You said earlier that you needed Eraserhead's quirk, specifically," Tsukauchi says, shooting the blonde stranger a look that Izuku can't interpret. "Can you elaborate on why?"

Izuku looks at his hands, balled into fists against his chest where he can pretend they're harmless. Blood has dried a rusty brown, caked under his fingernails, proving that he's anything but. He stretches his fingers out, staring helplessly at the evidence of everything he has done, of everything that cannot be *undone*.

Izuku doesn't want to say it. He's not entirely sure he *can* say it. He wants to curl up in a ball and scream and scream and scream until all the bad things inside of him are gone, which means he would probably be screaming forever.

He doesn't want to explain, but he needs to. He has to. He *has* to. It's why he's here. He came all this way, he *did all this*, and now he must explain himself.

And maybe when he's done, he can finally rest. Behind bars or in whatever cell the heroes stick him in. In whatever afterlife Tomura sends him to.

It is hard to speak. Every sound wants to be a shriek. Izuku's voice wants to shatter into nonsensical pieces. But he forces words into subservience, strained and thready and barely audible, praying he won't be asked to repeat himself.

"I needed it to kill my father."

I needed it to kill my father.

Shouta has never felt a silence so poignant as the one that follows that murmured confession. He wishes he could see the look on the kid's face. He wishes he could reach out and *touch*. Lay a hand on the kid's shoulder, maybe. Shouta doesn't know, exactly – it's an entirely alien desire to him, who neither likes to touch nor be touched, with the sole exception of Hizashi, who Shouta has loved for half his life.

But there is something about this kid.

Shouta has seen murderers. He has seen the worst of humanity, has looked into the eyes of dozens of people who thrive on the suffering of others, who plan their every action with the sole intent of causing people pain for the sake of their own pleasure.

Most murderers, though, are not like that. Shouta has seen *all kinds* of murderers. Some are righteous, some are frantic, some are confused or lost, angry or scared. He has seen them young, remorseful, even tortured by guilt. He has seen them cry and plead and punish themselves far worse than the law would deem just. He has seen villains and victims and both wrapped into one. He has seen it all.

It never gets any easier.

“Young man,” Yagi says, voice appropriately grave but stern in a way Shouta wants to protest, even if he can’t say it’s entirely unjustified. “Who was your father?”

“Shigaraki Hisashi,” the kid says, words fragmented and pieced back together like stained glass. “And… *and* All for One.”

Neither name means anything to Shouta, but they certainly mean *something,* judging by the way both Yagi and Tsukauchi suck in sharp breaths.

“That can’t be,” Yagi denies.

“He’s telling the truth,” Tsukauchi says, though he sounds doubtful even as he verifies the claim. “What does Erasure have to do with this?”

“M-my f-fa – my *dad*, he–” the kid’s sentence dissolves, cutting off with a whine, far too similar to the sound he made when Shouta stupidly erased whatever quirk he was using. Shouta sits up, making to stand, though he has no idea what he is planning to do or how he is meant to help when he doesn’t have working eyes or arms.

Hizashi, thankfully, is a step ahead of him.

“Hush, listener, you’re alright,” Hizashi says in a carefully moderated tone that Shouta wishes he would put in the effort to use more often. “You don’t need to talk, you don’t need to answer any more–” Hizashi pauses. “Okay, okay. Do you know sign language?” Another pause. “Maybe you could write it down, then. You write, I’ll read. Does that sound good? You have some paper on you, Detective?”

“Of course,” Tsukauchi responds, accompanied by the tell-tale rustle of him searching through the many pockets of his coat. “My quirk doesn’t work with writing, though.”

“We can worry about fact checking later, yeah? For now, let’s just get

everything out there."

Shouta sits in his bed, listening as close as he can to the scratch of pen across paper, and feels distinctly useless. With Hizashi here, Shouta can at least trust that the situation is being well-handled, but that doesn't stop him from feeling like some kind of twisted voyeur, audience to distress but unable to contribute anything meaningful to help abate it.

After a long moment, Hizashi clears his throat and reads, "'My father had a quirk like mine. He had a lot of quirks that he had stolen. Some of them were keeping him alive, in spite of severe injuries he had received. I needed Erasure to get rid of those.'"

"No," Yagi repeats, and Shouta can perfectly imagine the stubborn set of the man's jaw from his tone. "All for One has been dead for years." Pen scratches on paper and Yagi huffs a frustrated breath. "*No.* I killed him, I'm sure of it." The scratching pauses, then resumes, slow and deliberate.

"Ah," Hizashi says when the pad of paper is passed to him. "'My father was badly *injured* in a fight against–' well. He says, 'in a fight against *All Might* when I was nine years old. He didn't die. You never found a body, did you?'"

A new silence falls, and Shouta curses internally at Yagi's carelessness. For a man so obsessed with secrets, he gives himself away remarkably quickly under pressure. It's a miracle his identity and health situation weren't already known to the whole country.

"No," Yagi eventually replies. "I didn't."

"So, All for One didn't die six years ago, as we had believed, but he is dead *now?"* Tsukauchi asks, sounding impressively composed given what Shouta has gathered to be a rather large revelation.

"'Yes,'" Hizashi reads, his confusion leaking into the affirmative. Shouta – still puzzling out the situation himself, trying to piece the information together literally blind – relates.

"What do you know about his plans? What has he been doing, all these years?"

"'I don't know. He always said he wanted to make the world better–' He put that in quotes, by the way, '–but he never told me what that meant. Mostly, he just raised me. He was my dad.'" There is a subtle

thread of discomfort in Hizashi's voice, obvious to Shouta, who can identify every one of his husband's many cadences. It's a strange and painful contrast to the soft sniffles and teary gasps coming from the kid.

"What about the League of Villains? Who is Shigaraki Tomura?"

"'Tomura isn't the villain.' He, uh, underlined 'isn't' three times."

"Then who is?"

"Me!" the kid shouts, paper crunching and rustling as he discards the pad. "Or-or my f-father, o-or I – I don't know, I d-don't know, but *Tomura* – he, he n-never *asked* f-for this, he never g-got a ch-cho-*choice!* You can't just – *you can't.* I'll be the villain! I-I'll be the v-villain but you n-ne-n – you n-need to *save* T-Tomura."

"Midoriya, please, take a breath–"

"No! N-no! I did – oh g-god – I d-*did* all t-*this* s-so T-Tom-Tomura c-could be s-*safe*. You c-can't!"

"Hey listener, hey, shhh, you're going to be okay, just breathe with me alright? Just breathe."

With the kid spiraling into yet another breakdown, Shouta has officially had enough. He stands, exuding all the intimidation he can in the state he's in, and turns towards where Yagi and Tsukauchi's voices originate from.

"Out," he commands, prepared to physical remove them both from the room if needs must, regardless of the plaster around his arms.

"Aizawa–" Tsukauchi begins, obviously about to protest but at least having the good grace to sound remorseful about it. Shouta doesn't particularly want to hear it, either way.

"No. Out. None of your questions are so important that they can't wait until he's stable enough to answer them."

"Young Aizawa, you don't understand what's at stake here–"

"I *understand*," Shouta interrupts, pitching his voice higher to be heard over the increasing volume of Izuku's cries, "that we are working with a traumatized child, and I'm not about to let you traumatize him further. He's not going anywhere. *Out, now.*"

Ultimately it is a wail, ear-piercing and ghastly, that achieves Shouta's goal and drives the men out of the room. Shouta himself lingers for a moment, wishing he had some way to assess the situation other than sound because it certainly doesn't *sound* like things are going well. But beneath the kid's hysterical noises, Shouta can still hear Hizashi's soothing words, well-practiced and calm, giving away none of the stress Shouta is sure he's feeling.

Zashi is good at this stuff– far better than Shouta. Maybe there's no consoling someone in a situation like this, no way to offer any kind of comfort that matters, but Hizashi has always been a pillar of support for anyone that needs him, and he's especially good with kids.

Izuku will be safe, if not sound.

It is still hard for Shouta to leave them behind.

"We need to figure out how we're going to handle this," he says as he closes the door to the infirmary. The sound of panic is muffled, but not muted, behind it.

"Well," Yagi begins, "you mentioned he had some kind of emotional suppression quirk that allowed him to get this far. Perhaps he could just turn that back on–"

"No," Shouta interrupts.

"He has essential information. If whatever quirk he was using before would put him in a state to share it–"

"Absolutely not. Out of the question."

"Quirks of that nature often prove detrimental to long-term mental health," Tsukauchi says. The detective has been oscillating up and down in Shouta's favor all afternoon, but his rationality here is certainly a point in his favor. "It would be entirely unethical for us to advocate for the kid to use it further."

"Of course," Yagi agrees with a sigh. "You're right. I apologize, I shouldn't have suggested it. But the fact remains that the boy *needs* to be interrogated."

"He does," Shouta says. "But that's not something we can rush. Getting a proper statement from him will take time. The question is what we do with him in the meantime."

Yagi hums. “There are plenty of open cells at the station, I’m sure.”

“No,” Tsukauchi refutes before Shouta can, gaining another point in his favor. “The station doesn’t have high enough security. Based on what Midoriya has said about limited time and Shigaraki and Kurogiri coming to find him, we’ll want a heavy guard on him. Tartarus seems a bit extreme, without having established how culpable the boy himself is, but the Commission has holding cells that should be sufficient.” Shouta immediately detracts the point.

“You’re kidding,” Shouta bites out, voice flat and scornful. “If you hand him over to the Commission the kid will never see light again, no matter how innocent or guilty he ends up being.”

“He’s dangerous, Aizawa,” Yagi counters.

“‘Dangerous,’ says the man who could level half the country in a minute flat. We’re all dangerous.”

“You have no idea what that boy is capable of.”

“Neither do you. You know what his *father* is capable of. Terrible things, I’d guess. But you can’t just lock up a *child* and throw away the key because you’re afraid of things he *might* do when you don’t even know what he *has* done.”

“He attacked the USJ–”

“Harming no one, and, in fact, *preventing* the death or injury of at least two students.”

“He *murdered* his father.”

“Who was apparently a villain.”

“It’s a crime, nonetheless–”

“He killed a man that you believed to be long dead by your *own* hand.”

“That’s different. I’m a hero.”

“I have news for you, Yagi. The only thing that separates most heroes from most villains is a government sanction. If he were anyone else, you’d be thanking him.”

They fall into silence. If not for the bandages covering Shouta’s eyes,

he imagines they would be engaged in an intense stare down, but as it is, they just stand next to each other, tense.

“Do you have any suggestions?” Tsukauchi asks. He sounds tired and resigned, like a man with a choice to make but no good options to pick from.

“Yes, actually,” Shouta responds. “Take him into protective custody. Put him in a safehouse and guard him with as many heroes and officers as you think necessary to protect the kid from the League and the outside world from the kid. Keep him there for as long as it takes to get the information you need from him and determine where he stands in this whole mess. If he’s dangerous, he’ll be contained. And if he’s not – if he’s just a kid who got dealt a shit hand and made of it what he could – then he’ll be safe and comfortable until we can figure out what to do with him in the long-term.”

“You’ve really latched onto this kid, haven’t you?” Tsukauchi asks with a sigh.

“I’m a teacher,” Shouta deadpans. “Advocating for children is my job. And I’m a hero. I know a victim when I see one.”

“Alright, fine. I’ve got some calls to make.”

Tsukauchi wanders down the hall to do just that, leaving Shouta and Yagi standing outside the infirmary. Behind the door, Izuku is no longer screaming, but soft sobs still filter through, tragic background noise. Shouta can’t wait to get home and curl up on the couch with the cats and finally take a goddamned nap. Exhaustion weighs him down like a stone slab, but he suspects with jaded resignation that sleep will evade him tonight.

“I hope you’re right about the boy,” Yagi says eventually. “For everyone’s sake.”

Here’s the thing – Shouta will admit that it’s possible that he’s wrong. He doesn’t think he is, but he could be. Maybe the kid has already been thoroughly corrupted by whoever the hell All for One was. Maybe he will grow up to be the worst villain they have ever seen. Maybe he will destroy them all, like Yagi seems to think.

But even if he is, even if he does, Shouta would make the same choice. Shouta would sooner die than condemn a child due to his own paranoia, even if there is a degree of merit to those fears. Because it’s a simple fact of life that all children deserve a chance.

“You’re not a cruel man, Yagi,” he says. “Pull your head out of your ass.”

Tomura knows anger.

Anger is hot and familiar. It warms him from the inside out, so much so that he sometimes feels like he is boiling in his skin. It lives inside him like a parasite, feeding off of everything he does.

Anger is the only thing that has been with Tomura his entire life. Father taught him anger, and then Sensei taught him what to *do about it*. Tomura knows it inside and out, and it knows him just as well.

Anger is not bloody clothes and empty bookshelves. Phones and panic buttons and other important things left behind. Losing things, losing people, losing yourself.

This is not anger.

This is *wrath*.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
General mental instability. Panic attacks and depression. Izuku is in a very bad place. Nothing that hasn’t been seen in previous chapters, but just MORE of it, all at once.

But hey, at least he FINALLY gets some comfort. We’re done with hurt-no-comfort. Now we’re on to hurt-AND-comfort. Still hurt, though. Uhhh yeah, definitely still lots of hurt to go around.

Aizawa: *has both his arms in casts*
Me: *writes an entire scene that necessitates the use of his hands*
Me: …
Me: *f u c k*

(While Izuku is panicking)
Tsukauchi: Did you really have to call Mic?
Aizawa: You were fucking it up.

Yamada: Sho, we should adopt. Maybe a sweet little baby girl

Izuku: *killed his dad, has Trauma™*
Aizawa: I want that one
Yamada: Yep, I'll start the paperwork

Izuku: I stole your quirk and used it to kill my villain father
Aizawa: So you're in the market for a dad, then?
Izuku: What?
Aizawa: What?

Izuku: Earlier today I killed my father, All for One –
All Might: All for One has been dead for six years!
Izuku: No, I killed him like three hours ago. Are you even listening?

Next chapter: Lie Detection – Part III,,, I think. It was supposed to be Part I of the next chapter, but I added some things at like 3AM last night (technically this morning), so I think Lie Detection needs a Part III, sorry. But also the scenes might not work so who knows lmao
Update: Dec. 31 (this much I am sure of)
Only just now realizing that Christmas Eve and New Years Eve are exactly a week apart but as far as I'm concerned, my update schedule trumps international holidays.

Lie Detection - Part III

Chapter Notes

> The only CW is the poor state of Izuku's general mental health, but what else is new.
>
> This part is VERY SHORT, sorry. It's more of a 2.5 than a 3 – a transition between this chapter and the next. Hopefully y'all enjoy, and if not, the story will be moving forward next week.
>
> Have some premium bonus content from the Discord
> Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X X X
> Lemon: X
> Mischief: X
> Surya: X X
> The discord,,, has really latched onto train memes
> And also I drew a matching Tomura for the Izuku in last chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they say they are taking Izuku to a safehouse, he expects a small, dark room underground that will keep him contained so he can't hurt anyone else.

What he gets is a house.

It is not particularly large. The front door has several locks that only the heroes can open, and the windows are all covered by curtains that wouldn't budge even if Izuku pulled at them. There are cameras everywhere – some obvious, with blinking lights and bodies that swivel towards motions, others small and nondescript, designed to be unnoticeable like the one at the gates of UA. At least two heroes and one police officer are in the house at all times, sometimes more. They are neither kind nor cruel, as silent and watchful as the cameras.

And Izuku is hardly treated as a mere guest. Bands around both of his wrists keep his quirk suppressed, though they do nothing to inhibit his movement since they're no longer connected by a chain. His backpack with his notebooks is taken as evidence, but they leave him his mother's locket and that's the only thing he can't stand to lose.

But there is a bedroom, with a comfortable bed and a dresser that has been filled with simple clothes in Izuku's size. There is a living room with a couch and a TV that gets more channels than the one in the

bar. There is a kitchen where a hero cooks meals for Izuku and with a fridge that is always full of snacks.

It is, in fact, a *safehouse*, where Izuku is being kept safe from the outside world just as much as the outside world is being kept safe from him.

For a moment, Izuku doesn't understand why they bother. All these amenities and resources are being wasted on his safety and comfort, and the heroes must know that. But then Tsukauchi comes to ask more questions, and the effort makes sense.

Despite trying his best, Izuku hasn't done a very good job of sharing the information he has. He knows how important it is, but whenever he tries to talk about certain things – unfortunately, the *most important* things – the aching hollowness of his insides fills up with guilt and grief and horror until he can't talk or breathe or see. Until he can't feel his fingertips or hear the questions being asked of him because he has been swallowed by all the terrible things he has done – suffocated in the dark, wet heat of the belly of the beast, where all he can do is scream.

Scream and scream and scream until his throat is raw and his voice cuts out, and then he is nothing, not even noise.

"How's it going with Midoriya?"

"It's not."

"Oh."

"I'll give it to the kid – he's trying. But whatever happened – he's so … *effected* by it. Granted, I can't really blame him, given the pieces I've gathered. Still, I can't get more than a few answers out of him before he starts to break down. Nobody else has had any more luck with him, either."

"Well shit."

"Ha! Yeah, that's one way to put it."

"What are you going to do?"

“What *can* I do? Be patient. Be persistent. Try not to break the kid in the process.”

“Kids are supposed to be resilient, aren’t they?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Have you looked for someone with a quirk that might help?”

“I’ve looked, yeah, but haven’t really found anything. Memory quirks unreliable at best, and the handful of people I’ve talked to aren’t willing to use their quirks in such an extreme circumstance, anyway. Same thing with emotion-based calming quirks. No one I’ve talked to wants to use their quirk in such a volatile situation, where it might do more harm than good.”

“Can’t say I blame them.”

“Me either. Doesn’t make it any less inconvenient, though.”

“No, I don’t suppose it does. Damn. Well, I don’t envy you, that’s for sure.”

“Only an idiot would.”

/ / / / /

“Is it weird that I’m worried about him?”

“Who?”

“Wha – The kid, obviously!”

“Why are you worried?”

“Sorry, were you not in the same room I was? The poor boy had an absolute breakdown! I had to knock him out!”

“You knock people out all the time. It’s literally what you do. Your hero name could practically *be* Knock-Out. Wait. Heh, that’d actually be perfect. Knock-Out, get it, because–”

“I knock *villains* out all the time, not children!”

“I think the kid was the same age as our first years. You knock those out plenty often.”

“Yes, in training exercises and exams! Controlled situations! Not because they’re suddenly so hysterical there’s a legitimate concern that they’re going to harm themselves if I don’t use my quirk on them! You’re being difficult on purpose.”

“Look, I just don’t get the big deal. The kid *was* a villain. And whatever his problem is, I’m sure Recovery Girl took good care of him. There are other people handling it – capable people. Nothing for us to worry about.”

“Well, I’m worried anyway.”

“You can’t get personally concerned about every distressed person that crosses your path. Seriously. It’s not healthy – especially not in our line of work. You good?”

“…I know. I’m fine, I swear. It’s not like I’m, I don’t know, *hugely burdened* or anything. Only a little worried. It’s just – he was odd, don’t you think? So small and quiet and serious.”

“Yeah, definitely. And let me say, his oddness made me more worried for *us* than for *him*. Nobody should act that empty, it never ends well. Not to mention that Nedzu seemed interested in him and that’s practically an omen of doom.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

“*I’m* dramatic? Okay, Ms. ‘Worried about a kid I met for all of five minutes.’”

“Shut up! It’s the maternal instincts!”

“*Maternal?* You don’t have a maternal bone in your body!”

“Oh my god. Why do I even talk to you?”

“Beats me.”

/ / / / /

“Who the hell is All for One?”

“Apparently the biggest deal that no one has ever heard of.”

“It’s strange to think that there could be someone like that just under all our noses.”

“Strange? Sure. But surprising?”

“…Fair point. People do love their secrets.”

“I hate people.”

“Of course you do.”

“*And* their secrets.”

“I know, I know.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“Yes, it is. Now go to sleep.”

/ / / / /

“He knows who I am.”

“…Most likely.”

“Has he said anything about it?”

“He hasn’t said much of anything, yet. According to the reports of the people watching him, he’s barely spoken outside of questioning, and that’s been going … slowly, as you already know.”

“Do you think he’ll tell anyone?”

“Who would he tell? Even if he had anyone to talk to, he’s not much of a conversationalist, at the moment.”

“I don’t know. What if he manages to contact the League?”

“Questioning him may be a slow process but we’ve already determined that he won’t be going back to the League. I’m not entirely sure yet who’s side he’s on, but it’s not theirs. He’s fully convinced that the next time he crosses paths with the League, he’ll wind up dead.”

“What about the press, then?”

“*Why* would he tell the press?”

“If his goal is to destroy All Might, that’d do it.”

“Yagi, I understand your concern, but … I honestly don’t think this kid

is out to destroy *anything*."

Izuku spends a lot of time in bed.

The bedroom doesn't have a door, and there are three cameras throughout the room that leave no blind spots in their coverage, but Izuku doesn't mind that. He lies on top of the blankets and stares at the wall, trying to pinpoint exactly what shade of off-white it is – he has a quirk that could do that, if not for the cuffs. He tries not to think about anything except shades of color names.

Cream, eggshell, ivory, vanilla, bone –

No, not bone.

That's too close to things he doesn't want to think about.

He lies there, and when the emotions that rampage through him get too big to ignore, he curls up into a ball and makes himself small. Tries to scrunch up everything that he is and everything that he is feeling. Tells himself that he is *small*, and the universe is *big*, and nothing really matters, not even the *horrible terrible awful* things he has done.

No matter how tightly he curls up, though, it doesn't seem to help.

Izuku feels like the space between the stars. Cold. Dark. Empty. Ever-expanding.

Lonely.

He is alone, despite the cameras and the heroes who look in on him in ten-minute increments. Despite Tsukauchi, who speaks with him every few hours to gather whatever new details Izuku is able to force out of lips that are numb from biting back screams.

He has never been alone, before.

When he was very little, he was surrounded by people, loved and adored the way all lucky children are. When he took on the false title of Quirkless and the world turned against him, his mother stayed by his side, and loved him even more fiercely, defiantly. When he lost his

mother, his family grew paradoxically larger.

Now, Izuku is grieving a death he has no right to mourn, wishing his father could still be alive when Izuku was the one to kill him. And he is grieving alone, because everyone around him is grateful for All for One's death, and the only people who might share Izuku's grief would sooner kill him than comfort him.

He has lost everyone, and he has no one to blame but himself.

Wherever Tomura is, however he is grieving, Izuku hopes he is not alone.

Izuku curls up in a tight, tight ball, and he hopes.

Cream, eggshell, ivory, vanilla…

"He slit his father's throat."

"Jesus Christ. Please tell me you're joking."

"Nope."

"That's gruesome."

"Yep."

"How'd he even manage it?"

"He put him to sleep first, apparently. Hummed him a lullaby."

"That's…"

"A different kind of gruesome? Tell me about it."

"No wonder the kid is fucked up."

"You said it."

/ / / / /

"He has incredible potential."

“Those words, from your mouth, strike fear into the very depths of my being.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’m just stating facts.”

“You’re never just stating facts. You’re planning something.”

“Nothing nefarious, I assure you.”

“I’m not assured.”

“Now you’re just being paranoid.”

“It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you. And history shows that you *are*.”

“Well… Not *you*.”

/ / / / /

“Can we get a fast track on the tests for that hand we retrieved from the USJ attack?”

“Sure thing. Did Midoriya finally tell you something useful?”

“He’s talking. It’s a work in progress, but he’s talking. We couldn’t find any records of ‘Shigaraki Tomura’ because he doesn’t actually exist.”

“Wow, shocker.”

“I don’t need your sarcasm.”

“I thought I’d be generous and share anyway. What’s the hand got to do with it all?”

“I was getting to that, before you interrupted. Apparently, it belonged to so-called Shigaraki Tomura’s biological father. We should be able to use it to find his legal identity. He was picked up by All for One when he was five years old, so there probably won’t be that many records of him as a kid, but anything is better than nothing.”

“That it is. I’ll get it done. Give me, eh, five days or so?”

“Make it three.”

“Bossy, bossy.”

/ / / / /

“Has Tsukauchi told you anything new?”

“If he had, I would have told you.”

“I’m worried about the little listener, all alone in whatever safehouse they stuck him in.”

“He’s not alone. He’s under constant guard.”

“Okay, maybe not alone, then. Still probably lonely. That’s almost worse, don’t you think? Lonely but not alone.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“…Me, too.”

“Do you think Tsukauchi would let me visit him?”

“Probably. He’s being less of a dick than he was. I think the kid has grown on him, the last couple of days.”

“Maybe I’ll do that, then.”

“Couldn’t hurt. When are you thinking about going?”

“Tomorrow, probably. After classes.”

“The committee is supposed to be meeting, then.”

“I know. That’s why I chose it.”

“You don’t want me to come?”

“Sho, hmm, how to put this gently? You’re intimidating.”

“…”

“And not the best with people.”

“…”

“And you and the kiddo have some history.”

“Okay, you can stop, I get it.”

“Sorry, Kitten.”

“You’re not wrong. You’ll tell me how it goes?”

“Of course.”

/ / / / /

“What if he betrays us?”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“It just seems like a lot to gamble on a what if.”

“You’d rather gamble with a kid’s life?”

“I… *rather* is a strong word.”

“But if given the choice, that’s the one you’d make. Condemn him, even though he might be good, rather than risk him being evil.”

“No. I don’t know. That’s the problem – I just don’t know.”

“You’re going to have to figure it out. Pretty soon, decisions are going to start being made. *Big* decisions, with that kid’s whole life on the line. A lot of people have no idea what to do with him, and what *you* choose is going to mean a lot to them. We’ve got nearly twenty people on this committee, but at the end of the day, it really just comes down to you. You realize that, right?”

“No pressure.”

“Pressure. Definitely pressure.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how to best do my duty as a hero.”

“Consider this: that kid did something terrible.”

“He killed his father.”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on his side?”

“I am. He did something terrible because he thought he *had* to. He needed a hero, but nobody came, so he did it himself, to save *everyone*. He’s not to blame for that. *We* are. Maybe it’s time for us to

do our goddamned jobs and save *him*."

"…How are we meant to trust him?"

"The same way we trust anyone. Give him a chance. Then see what he does with it."

Tomura does not know betrayal.

What happened to him when he was young – that wasn't a betrayal. There was never any trust there to begin with, nothing to be broken. He was lost, and he was angry, but he was never betrayed.

Since then, Sensei has always been on Tomura's side, helping him grow stronger, acting in his best interest, always. As has Kurogiri, if in a more annoying manner. And Izuku –

Tomura is acquainted with betrayal only through videogames. It is a popular theme, he has noticed. Maybe it's the type of thing that a lot of people – people less lucky than Tomura has been – can relate to. Or maybe it's just for the sucker punch value of a good plot twist. Regardless, Tomura has seen a lot of betrayal through a screen, has participated in it from the other side of a controller. But he has never particularly cared about it. Tomura liked games for the gameplay, and he would usually just skip cutscenes and the like, except Izuku –

Izuku hates stuff like that. He always cringes and yells and cries when characters turn against each other, like every pixelized representation of broken trust hits him straight in the heartstrings. Izuku just doesn't have the stomach for it. For that cutthroat brutality that is such an essential part of so many people. He can't handle it the same way he can't handle violence.

He can't handle things like – things like slit throats and bloody clothes and broken trust.

Enemies and theft and wrath are not in the same realm as Izuku. They are not *supposed* to be. Izuku is *supposed* to be separate from all of that. He is *supposed* to be brighter, better. Izuku, Tomura's soft little brother.

Tomura does not know betrayal.

But he is learning.

Chapter End Notes

If, in the dialog scenes, you don’t know who is speaking, you’re probably not meant to. Seriously, don’t worry too much about who is saying what. For the most part, think of their identities more as cameos.

Tomura, finally acknowledging that Izuku killed AFO: We've been tricked, we've been backstabbed, and we've been quite possibly bamboozled

Tsukauchi: What’s up with this hand we found in the USJ?
Izuku: Oh, that’s Tomura’s father.
Tsukauchi: …It’s a hand.
Izuku: Yeah. Tomura killed him in an accident when his quirk first manifested.
Tsukauchi: Okay, that’s it. I have officially met my weekly quota for patricide. No more.

Yamada: How to put this gently?
Yamada: You’re scary, your people skills suck, and the kid is afraid of you.
Aizawa: …That was meant to be gentle?

Next chapter: Voice - Part I
Update: Jan 7

Voice - Part I

Chapter Notes

CW - Izuku. He's own warning at this point. Sad.

When I said IGG was going to be 17 chapters, I certainly did not anticipate that it would take me 12 chapters to write 5 chapters. Welcome to chapter 13, aka the start of chapter 6. There is nothing confusing about this.

But hey, more chapters means more memes! Courtesy of the Discord as always. Join us, become train! I'd say we don't bite, but that would be a little too ironic, given my username
Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X
Gothmoth: X X
Mantis: (CW for some blood) X
Mischief: X
Racoon: X X (not pictured: dead Yagi) X
(more memes in the end notes because they won't all fit, damn you character limits)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku spends his third day in the safehouse curled up in the corner of the couch, staring at mindless cartoons on the television, eyes too blank and unfocused to truly say he is watching. Left to his own devices, he would have preferred to stay in bed, continuing with his quest to pinpoint the exact shade of white of the walls, but the hero who brought him breakfast in the morning had gently ushered him out of bed and insisted he stay in the living room. It is probably easier for them to keep an eye on him, this way.

Sometimes, the same hero attempts to speak to him, but Izuku digs his nails into the upholstery and doesn't reply. The poor woman looks so uncomfortable. Izuku remembers her debut, around three years ago. She's done well for herself, since, and there's a part of him – the part that is somehow the same even though it feels like everything about him should be changed – that wants to ask her about her quirk.

He's never really been able to talk to someone about their own quirk, before. All for One was always eager to talk quirks, but only ever to analyze the ones they had stolen or would like to steal. Kurogiri was a nomu, and the interactions between his quirks were fascinating to

think about, but it was still different than talking to someone who had grown up with a quirk that was made for them, a part of them. And Tomura didn't like talking about his quirk much, especially if Izuku started to hint that his situation was anything like Kurogiri's – which Izuku always did, because he didn't know how to leave the topic alone. Talking about quirks always ended with Tomura aggravated. The only person Izuku had ever been able to talk about quirks with the way he wanted to was his mother, and he had only been ten years old when he lost her, still far too young to know all the right questions to ask.

Izuku stares at the TV so long and hard that his vision starts to go grey around the edges. He blinks hard and tries to ignore the fact that his entire family is now in past tense.

He doesn't think this hero would appreciate his questions, even if Izuku could un-cement his jaw to ask them. Imagine, the quirk stealing boy bombarding you with questions on how yours works and what you can do with it. Even with his quirk suppressed, that would be disconcerting. She already looks concerned enough, just sitting near him, without him actively making it worse. He wonders how it was determined who would be watching him; he wonders if the heroes assigned to his safehouse are being punished for something.

At almost exactly noon, Tsukauchi arrives. He knocks a distinct sequence that echoes through the small room, and the hero standing near the door – an older pro who debuted just after Izuku started primary school – begins undoing the multitude of locks with a haste that speaks of relief.

"Hello Midoriya," Tsukauchi says as he enters. "How are you feeling today? It's good to see you up and about." Izuku shrugs as Tsukauchi takes the quickly-vacated seat across from him on the couch. Neither of the heroes in the room leave, but they both press close to the walls and avert their eyes, the closest thing to privacy Izuku can be given.

"There's only a few more things I want to ask you, for now. Do you think you can answer?"

"Yes," Izuku says, aloud, because Tsukauchi will only proceed if he answers verbally. His voice barely cracks.

"You've already told me a lot about your father and the League. Thank you for that – I know it hasn't been easy. So far, I've been trying to get as many facts as possible about the USJ incident and All for One's

activity in the last five years. We've talked about whos and whats and whens, but now I'm going to ask a couple of whys, alright? Please just answer as completely and honestly as you can."

Izuku picks at some dirt that has found its way under his thumbnail. "Okay."

"You knew your father was evil, and you didn't approve of the things he did. So why did you stay with him?"

"He wasn't e-evil," Izuku denies immediately. "Evil is just a w-word people use so they don't have to try to un-understand each other."

It is a pointless correction to make. To all but a handful of people, Izuku's father will never be anyone more than All for One – only ever an evil man who did evil things, with not even the faintest shades of grey around the black abyss where his soul was meant to be. It hurt for Izuku to admit that Shigaraki Hisashi was All for One, a duality of a man, and it hurts even more to know that, for most of the world, All for One is the only part of the man that matters.

"Alright," Tsukauchi ascents, though his eyes clearly say he doesn't agree. "You knew he was a villain, then."

"I did. But he w-wasn't *my* v-villain. He was my f-f-*father*."

"You said he hurt you."

"He did," Izuku whispers, a soft confession that hurts just as much this time as it did the first time he admitted it aloud. "But he also l-loved me. He *did*."

"So you stayed because he loved you?"

"B-because *I* l-loved *him.* Bec-cause I l-loved them a-*all.*"

"Can you clarify who you mean by 'all?'"

"My f-father. Kurogiri. T-Tom-mura. They – They're my f-family."

Were, Izuku corrects to himself, sternly. Izuku's life is in past tense, now. The sooner that sticks in his head, the sooner this painful cycle of forgetting-remembering-forgetting-remembering will stop.

"Family can be a powerful motivator," Tsukauchi says, half-sympathetic and half-appeasing as Izuku's words grow shakier. He pauses for a moment as Izuku takes a handful of shuddering breaths.

“Only one more question. This is the hardest one, it’s okay if you can’t answer. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Midori – Izuku. *Why* did you kill your father?”

Izuku turns his eyes back to the bright colors and graphic lines flashing across the television screen as his chest seizes. For a long moment, he traces the shapes in his mind as he tries to properly put into words actions that he has barely been able to justify to himself. There are too many things, too many reasons, all tangled together into a sum that is greater than the parts.

“Have you ever heard of the trolley problem?” Izuku asks. His voice sounds like static in his ears.

“Of course.”

“Do you ever wonder why they don’t just stop the train? In real life, that’s what they’d do. They’d just stop the train.”

“Alright,” Tsukauchi responds, hesitant and gentle, afraid to push too hard. “What does this–”

Izuku’s head thumps against the back of the couch. “My father was the train.”

“Oh.”

“I was so tired of picking lives,” Izuku admits softly, barely audible against the upbeat theme of the cartoon’s end credits. “People kept getting st-stuck on the – on the *train tracks*, and I – Why keep p-pulling l-lev-levers when you c-can j-just–” His voice cracks, words shriveling up as his throat closes around them. Tears wells in his eyes abruptly, the sting of them more potent than ever, as if the last few days of doing his best to repress them has somehow made them saltier. The faint texture of the ceiling is lost to a wet blur as his eyes spill over.

“When you can just stop the train,” Tsukauchi finishes. “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Tsukauchi places a hand on Izuku’s shoulder just as the first sob tears itself free, and Izuku can’t help the way his whole body trembles at the contact, torn between pulling away and leaning into the touch. In the end, he does neither, stiff as stone as Tsukauchi glides his thumb

in small lines against the fabric of Izuku's T-shirt.

"This won't last forever," Tsukauchi says quietly as Izuku cries. "You've been through a lot all at once, but you're still here, and you're not going to feel like this forever. It might seem impossible, and it might not be easy or quick, but someday you're going to be okay again, Izuku. I promise, you're going to be okay."

If Izuku could make his breath cooperate well enough to form words, he would have questions. Questions like *how?* and *when?* and *why bother?*

But Izuku can't speak, only sob, so he just sits, rigid beneath a touch he doesn't know how to accept and isn't sure he wants, with all his doubts confined to his head.

Bureaucracy is probably somewhere near the top of the list when it comes to things Shouta hates. He hates meetings and paperwork and having to listen to people talk around issues as they try to further their own agendas. Normally, Shouta would not be caught dead volunteering to be part any committee, not to mention one that is likely to be particularly full of bullshit. Yet here he is, of his own free will, slouched in a chair at a conference room table, nobly resisting the urge to slump to the ground and take a nap. If asked, he'd claim that he left his sleeping bag in his classroom for the sake of professionalism, but Shouta is unashamed to admit, at least to himself, that he left it behind mostly to remove the temptation it presents.

But, as he eyes one of the representatives sent by the Hero Public Safety Commission on the other side of the table, he can't bring himself to regret being here. This particular representative coolly raises her eyebrows as she flips through the information packet Tsukauchi has prepared, expression a study of unimpressed inscrutability.

Shouta ignores his own packet for the moment, familiar enough with the situation from hounding Tsukauchi the last few days, in favor of assessing the gathered group. His eyes ache – uncovered for the occasion, much to Recovery Girl's chagrin – though the room is kept relatively dim, with only half the overhead lights switched on, specifically to accommodate Shouta's stubborn insistence that he be

able to *see* what is going on during this meeting.

There are sixteen of them, counting Shouta, sitting in thick silence, broken only by the shuffle of papers and squeak of chairs as they shift around. Tsukauchi and two other officers on the case sit at the head of the square formation of tables, flanked by Nedzu and All Might. Shouta himself has taken a seat near the door, next to Thirteen, who offered him a commiserating smile as they stiffly took their seat. Endeavor, flames extinguished, sits beside the HPSC representatives – there's three of them in total, counting the woman whose eyebrows have not shifted from their elevated position since she began reading. There are five other heroes in the room, a couple of whom Shouta doesn't recognize. Two of them, he knows, were part of the rotations supervising Izuku, and he hopes that's a good sign, since anyone who actually spent *time* around the kid could see he's worth giving a chance.

It's not the worst group Shouta has ever seen, but he still doesn't trust a single person in it to not have some ulterior motive. That's why he's here, when he would much rather be at home, listening to trash television with a cat in his lap, halfway asleep. That's why he's here, sitting in an uncomfortable chair with a budding migraine, against doctor's orders, when he could be with Hizashi, checking in on the cause of all this drama.

After long minutes, thick and stifled, Tsukauchi clears his throat and stands, instantly drawing the attention of fifteen pairs of eyes.

"Thank you all for making the time to be here, today," he says, briefly making eye contact with each of them. "Midoriya Izuku, affiliated with the League of Villains, has turned himself in and shared with us what he knows. His circumstances are… unusual and we need to decide how to handle the situation from here."

"I don't see what's so unusual about it," Endeavor says, arms crossed over his broad chest. "He's hardly the first villain to turn himself in." One of the HPSC representatives nods slightly.

"Whether Midoriya can be classified as a villain is part of what this committee has been gathered to discuss," Tsukauchi responds, admirably concealing the bias Shouta knows he has after spending the last two days questioning the kid. "If we *do* decide he needs to be convicted, there's still the matter of his charges."

"He has stolen–" Endeavor flips through the pages of his packet "–

quirks."

"Under duress," Thirteen interjects softly, flooding Shouta with relief. Thirteen has always been a remarkably kind-hearted individual, but Shouta isn't particularly close to them, and he was unsure where they would stand on the issue, especially given the injuries they sustained at the USJ.

"Duress or not, that's 103 weapons he could use against us, and 103 people who are most likely dead, now."

"*Midoriya* didn't kill any of those people, though."

"But he allowed his father to," a HPSC representative says – it's the one with the eyebrows again, and this time she raises them patronizingly. "He's an accomplice, at best. And he *has* killed three people himself."

"You can't be counting those against him," someone across the room protests.

"Murder *is* a crime. One this boy has committed *three times*."

"He was ten years old the first time. He *accidentally* took a quirk, with no idea that doing so would result in the death of its holder," Shouta says, voice flat, but sharp enough to cut off the low drone of overlapping voices that was beginning to rise. "The second time he was *physically forced* to do so again. And the third time he eliminated a villain, the man who *is* responsible for those 103 deaths you were talking about."

A brief moment of silence follows Shouta's words, broken by a brave soul piping up, "Murder charges are maybe a bit severe, but there's still the USJ to consider. He participated in that, willingly. It says here that he's the one who provide the intel for dealing with Eraserhead and Thirteen?"

"He did," Tsukauchi confirms.

"It also says he saved several lives that day."

"Saved several lives from an attack that he orchestrated."

"He didn't orchestrate anything! The plan was made by All for One and Shigaraki Tomura. All Midoriya did was hand over some analysis on Eraserhead and Thirteen."

“Analysis that almost got the both of them killed.”

“Yet they’re both here speaking in his *favor*. That says something, doesn’t it?”

“Sure, that they’re fools, maybe.”

“And speaking of the League! You said Midoriya shared his information with us, but there’s hardly anything about the League in these pages.”

“You’re right. He must have been leaving things out.”

“Just goes to show that he’s still working with them.”

“Can’t you read? He’s definitely not working with *them* – but that doesn’t mean he’s not working for *someone*.”

“Everyone!” Tsukauchi shouts over the swell of voices. “It’s true that Midoriya elected not to answer some questions – namely those pertaining directly to the location and weaknesses of Shigaraki Tomura and Kurogiri. He withheld this because his primary goal is to keep Shigaraki Tomura safe – even to *save* him, potentially – which is not something he currently trusts us to do. This is all explained in the packets.”

The outcry that Tsukauchi briefly quieted immediately bursts out again, more than half the room talking all at once.

“Why should we be *saving* Shigaraki Tomura?”

“If his goal is to protect *Shigaraki* than there’s no way we can trust him!”

“He’s made his loyalties obvious!”

“Are you really going to fault a kid for caring about his brother?”

“If his brother is a homicidal maniac? Fuck yes, I am!”

“EVERYONE!” Tsukauchi shouts again, pushing back his chair as he does. The voices die to murmurs, but don’t fall completely silent, several rebellious individuals still whispering derision under their breath. “If we could please focus on the topic at hand!”

“I don’t see what the issue is,” Endeavor says. “Throw him in Tartarus and be done with it. It’s ridiculous that we’re wasting this much time

and energy on some villain child."

"You want to throw a *child* in Tartarus?" Shouta asks, disgust warring with disbelief.

"With so many quirks, it's likely the only place that can contain him."

"Why does he even need to be *contained?*"

"Well, I certainly don't want him taking *my* quirk! Do you?"

"He already has!" Shouta barks, frustration leaking into his tone. "He took it, used it to do *our job* for us, and then willingly submitted himself to all this bullshit we're putting him through just to give it back!"

"Tartarus is certainly too extreme," Yagi finally speaks up, raising a hand in a quelling gesture that immediately draws the attention of the room. Shouta would be glad that the man is showing an ounce of reason, but his tone – hesitant and indecisive, like he is asking a question – just wracks Shouta's irritation up higher.

"The Commission could always take him," one of the representatives says, with a plastic smile. "We have the resources to monitor him, but could offer him rehabilitation, if he shows good will."

Too many faces around the room look considering, as close to satisfied at they have been yet. They are tempted, by this idea of making the kid someone else's problem. Just leave him in someone else's hands – tell yourself they're capable and sweep him under the rug, no responsibilities and no guilt to weigh you down. Shouta grips the edge of the table hard, catching Yagi's eye across the room, hoping to god that *anything* Shouta said the day before sunk into that man's thick skull. Yagi's lips purse, brows pulling even lower over his eyes.

"That seems extreme, as well," he says, voice significantly more confident. "The boy is still so young. He deserves a chance, don't you think? A real one, with better influences in his life."

"The Commission can give him that."

"No," Yagi corrects with a frown. "You're proposing to give him a chance *if* he is good. I am proposing we give him a chance to *be* good."

"He could be," Shouta says. "If we give him a chance, he could be

amazing."

Anyone who knows Shouta knows that his saying this *means* something. Shouta's whole job is appraising potential, and he's *good* at his job. Shouta knows potential when he sees it, and he never bothers with pretending that it's there when it's not.

But the vast majority of people in this room *don't* know Shouta. They don't know that he expelled twenty hero hopefuls just last year, to massive backlash, because he knew they didn't have what it took. To these people, Shouta's words are just words, and they're easily brushed aside.

"Those are pretty sentiments," the representative says, exuding cloying benevolence that makes Shouta grit his teeth. There are few things that aggravate him more than being accused of being *sentimental*. "But how does that look in practice? Chances and coulds are all well and good in theory. But in *reality*, we have a dangerous and volatile child, and you are suggesting – what? That we simply *let him go?* Hope that doesn't come back to bite us down the line when he *does* turn out to be a villain?"

"No one said to set him lose without supervision. We could find a happy medium somewhere *between* completely unsupervised and imprisoned."

"I'm hearing a lot of talk of compromise, but no actual solutions. Who will watch him, if not the Commission?"

"Actually," Nedzu chimes up from his place near the head of the table.

Shouta, who has been waiting for the rat's voice to cut through the chaos this entire meeting, tenses instantly. Mixed relief and dread accompany Nedzu's interjection, because Shouta is certain that Nedzu won't want to see Izuku in jail, but he's equally certain that Nedzu will want *something,* because the vermin rarely does anything that doesn't further his own goals. As Nedzu climbs from his seat to the top of the table, the HPSC representative's smile twitches slightly, a gratifying break in her composure.

Nedzu tips his chin up, beady eyes sparkling, folds his paws behind his back, and announces, "I think you'll find that I have the solution you've been looking for!"

When the knocks come again, this time in early evening, Izuku is back in bed. He returned to the comfort of blankets and blank walls shortly after Tsukauchi left, the hero who originally insisted he stay in the living room making no attempt to stop him as he stumbled past her, still scrubbing tears from his eyes.

Izuku rolls into a seated position, pulling the blanket with him so it is wrapped around his shoulders and tucked underneath his toes. He wiggles back into the corner and wonders what Tsukauchi will ask this time. Whatever the questions are, Izuku will answer. He will answer, and Tsukauchi will not have to stop because Izuku starts to cry, and Tsukauchi definitely won't have to stop to *comfort* him.

Izuku will hold himself together. He can do that.

He already feels like he is falling apart.

Locks click in the living room, and Izuku counts each one as he presses his forehead against his knees. Low voices have a quiet exchange, muffled by the thick blanket around Izuku's ears, as Tsukauchi greets the heroes stationed to watch Izuku. No doubt, they are telling Tsukauchi that Izuku is in the bedroom, as if there is anywhere else he could be, other than here or out there on the couch. Tsukauchi will thank them for the obvious information and then he will come into the room, sit in the chair at the desk, and ask Izuku how he is feeling. Izuku will chose to shrug in place of telling a lie. Tsukauchi will force a smile as if he is fooled by it. Over the last few days, this has already become their routine.

This is not what happens.

Around the time Tsukauchi should be pulling the chair away from the desk, there is a soft rap on the wall. The bedroom doesn't have a door, and it's not as if Izuku is a *guest* here, so there is no reason to knock before entering, but the sound of knuckles against wood is unmistakable. Izuku lifts his head, looks to the sound, and blinks.

"Present Mic?" he asks, voice rising into an incredulous squeak at the end.

"That was fast!" the hero in the doorway responds with a wide smile. "It usually takes a moment for people to recognize me without the hair." To illustrate, he sweeps a hand above his head in an exaggerated motion that follows the curve of his signature style.

“Mind if I sit?” Izuku clutches at the edges of his blanket and nods numbly.

Present Mic – in soft-looking civilian clothes, with his hair pulled into a messy bun – enters the room with a lazy stride. He looks over the room, eyes landing briefly on Tsukauchi’s chair, but he opts instead to sit on the edge of the bed, his weight shifting the mattress beneath Izuku. Izuku pulls his knees in tighter, minimizing the space he takes up. A small part of him is irrationally afraid that his legs, left to their own devices, will stretch across the gap between them and infringe on Present Mic’s space. Or maybe it’s less a fear and more a temptation. Either way, Izuku locks his arms in a loop around his legs, hands clasped together in front of his ankles to keep himself contained.

“Why are you here?” Izuku asks without thinking, nearly biting his tongue half-way through the question when he realizes how rude he is being. Izuku has only been in the safehouse for three days, but the entire time, no one has come to see him but Tsukauchi and a couple of other officers who had questions for him.

“Huh? I’m just visiting!”

Izuku frowns. The hero couldn’t be here without a reason. Izuku highly doubts he would be allowed visitors, even if there *was* someone who would want to see him just for the sake of seeing him. Present Mic is a hero, and he had been present for at least part of Izuku’s initial questioning, so it’s not beyond the realm of belief that he would be *allowed* to see Izuku now, but there has to be some kind of motivation behind it. It can’t have anything to do with his quirk – Izuku is familiar enough with it to be sure it isn’t relevant to the situation. Is Present Mic supposed to be questioning him? Maybe he’s good at extracting information, but Izuku has already cooperated as well as he can with Tsukauchi, and he thought they had covered most of the important information already. Maybe Izuku is being transported, then. Maybe Tsukauchi has gotten all the information he needs, and Present Mic is here as backup in case Izuku tries anything on the way to wherever they are going next. Though that doesn’t explain why he has approached Izuku like this, sitting on the bed with smile that becomes sheepish as he sees Izuku’s frown.

Present Mic rubs his chin. “You were in a rough state the last time I saw you, little listener. I just wanted to check in. Thought maybe you’d enjoy some company.”

The uncertainty-driven anxiety that had been building in Izuku’s chest

deflates. That's it, then. Present Mic is here because he is a hero. More specifically – because he is a hero who thinks Izuku is a victim. It's an error of judgment on his part, though Izuku can see where it comes from, given the nature of their last few interactions. In his initial, panicked assessment, Izuku had overlooked the inexplicable burden of responsibility that empathy sometimes places on people.

"I'm fine," Izuku says to his knees. Unlike Tsukauchi, Present Mic's quirk won't tell him that Izuku is lying, but he fears it's obvious anyway – obvious in his red-rimmed eyes, in the soft rasp of his voice, in the way he wraps a blanket around his shoulders as if it is the only thing keeping him together. His fears are warranted, if the soft upward tilt of Present Mic's brow is anything to go by. Izuku buries the lower half of his face into the blanket and hopes they can get this over with quickly.

"Still!" Present Mic says, tone as upbeat as ever despite the sympathetic sadness in his eyes. "Never hurts to check in. Really, it's as much for me as it is for you, you know. Shouta hasn't stopped talking about you since you showed up!"

Shouta, as in Aizawa Shouta, Eraserhead. Right – he and Present Mic had been classmates. Izuku had watched them fight, in their first-year sports festival. They were in the same year, and possibly even the same class, if Aizawa had been transferred into 1-A. And now they both taught at UA, so it makes sense that they know each other well. Some of the tension that had dispersed when Izuku realized why the hero was here resurges now, wrapping around his lungs like bands that are a size too small.

"He's brought you up about four times in the past two days," Present Mic continues as Izuku once again asks himself why the hero is bothering to *visit* him. "Which might not sound like a lot, but it is for Sho! He's really taken an interest in you!"

Izuku can't blame him. If Izuku had his quirk stolen, he would probably like to know what was going on with the thief, too. But he certainly wouldn't want his – friend? – coworker visiting said thief and trying to make casual conversation. Which once again raises the question – *why* is Present Mic *here?* If he is on a first base with Aizawa Shouta, he should know well enough that Izuku doesn't deserve whatever comforting company he seems to be trying to offer.

"I won't bother him again," Izuku says.

Present Mic offers another smile, this one lopsided and confused. “Bother who?”

“Eraserhead.”

“Oh kiddo.” Mic scoots along the bed, not far, just an inch closer, but closer all the same. Izuku, already tucked into the corner, has nowhere to retreat to, but he pushes back against the wall nonetheless, until the peaks of his spine ache even with the cushion of the blanket. There is still over three feet of space between them, simultaneously an uncrossable chasm and paper thin. “You never bothered him to begin with.”

“I took his quirk.”

“You gave it back!”

The declaration is so cheery and matter of fact, as if returning something stolen is as good as never having stolen it. He already knows well enough that having something returned doesn’t erase the fear and pain and anger of having that thing taken to begin with. Izuku’s mouth twists and he digs his teeth into his lip before something harsh and hateful can spill out. He pulls the blanket tighter around him, until it is less like being cocooned and more like being constricted. Present Mic’s eyes do that soft-sad-pity thing again, and it makes Izuku’s own eyes burn.

Izuku does not deserve pity. His suffering is self-inflicted. Any pain he feels, he brought upon himself, and why should he be exempt from it? Why should he get a reprieve after all the pain he has caused? Izuku is sure Eraserhead had suffered. Eraserhead had suffered at the USJ, in the grips of the nomu, which Izuku could have called off at any time and chose not to. He suffered in the hospital, with no idea if he would ever be able to use his quirk again.

Present Mic is a good man, Izuku realizes, but a naïve one. Good, to want to spare people pain; naïve, to not realize that some people deserve it.

“He doesn’t blame you for what happened,” Present Mic says, solemn in a way he never is on the radio.

He should; I did it, Izuku wants to shout. But his jaw is glued shut, muscles tense and aching, and the words catch between his teeth like bits of shrapnel.

“He’s got nothing but good things to say about you, actually. And Shouta’s a great judge of character.” Izuku shakes his head, back and forth so fast that he would have swayed side to side if he hadn’t been braced against the wall. “He’s on your side. We both are.”

Izuku gasps. He buries his head against his knees again, and the blanket there is immediately too hot, too damp, too close, making it even harder to pull air into lungs that feel like they’re shrinking.

Izuku doesn’t *have* a side. Maybe he did, once, but then he killed one of the only people on it and lost all the others in the process. Which means that if Izuku still has a side at all – if it hasn’t been cut from ear to ear and left to bleed out – it’s the *wrong one to be on*. Izuku is a dirty teamkiller and players like that get kicked – that’s what Tomura would say, probably *is* saying, and Kurogiri won’t really understand what he means, because Kurogiri has never cared about videogames, but he’ll still agree because the word *“teamkiller”* really explains itself, doesn’t it?

“Breathe,” Present Mic says, cutting through Izuku’s thoughts. The mantra and voice are both too familiar at this point, and Izuku obeys like it’s a Pavlovian response. Breathe and let someone calm him down, because Izuku is no longer capable of acting human for even an hour without crumbling into pieces like words on the shredded pages of an unfinished story.

“Can I give you a hug?” Present Mic asks. He makes no move to cross the distance between them, waiting for Izuku’s response, and his tone is soft and non-threatening, but Izuku flinches so hard that his head snaps back and cracks against the wall. Present Mic makes a small, distressed noise in response, his hands fluttering around, but not reaching forward. “It’s okay, I won’t touch you if you don’t want. But if you do, the offer’s open.”

Izuku shakes his head, ardently enough that he nearly knocks it back into the wall, and that’s that. Present Mic calms him down, talking Izuku away from the newest ledge his constantly-encroaching panic has pushed him to, but makes no further attempts to touch him, and the three feet between them gapes wider than ever. When Izuku has calmed back into a semblance of humanity, Present Mic makes further attempts at conversation, casual and lighthearted, but Izuku has curled into himself, refusing to so much as make eye contact. He doesn’t want to see any more of those soft looks. He doesn’t want to see those hands hovering around, fingers splayed in unspoken offer. Izuku can’t take it. It burns to even think about.

For nearly an hour, though, Present Mic still doesn't leave. He carries a gentle and cheerful conversation all by himself, even when Izuku goes half-catatonic with the numb lethargy that always follows a near-brush with hysteria. Present Mic leaves with a soft promise to return, but even if the hero means what he says, Izuku doubts he will be here much longer.

Finally left alone again, Izuku rubs his cheek against the blanket until the fibers scratch at the tear-tender skin beneath his eyes. Alone, he wraps his arms around himself and squeezes until his ribs creek. He imagines his arms as someone else's, and his skin feels shivery-crawly, so he squeezes tighter, until the joints of his shoulders protest.

He tries to remember the last time he was hugged.

It's not as if Izuku was starved of affection, but affection came in many forms and *hugs* didn't really feature much in Izuku's life after his mother was taken from him. Kurogiri didn't like touching at all. Kurogiri was the type who provides, a silent, reliable presence. He leaves – left – small things in Izuku's room, just because he knew Izuku would like them. Tomura doesn't didn't like touching either – he was always so careful about his hands. He would touch Izuku though, because Izuku was special. But their affections were always the rough kind, shoving and wrestling, with bruises and breathless laughter.

And his father. His father generally preferred simple, brief contact. Ruffled hair and shoulder squeezes. Most of the time, he was stoic and reserved. He really only hugged Izuku when Izuku was distress. He would hug Izuku, now. Even after everything Izuku has done, if his father were here, he would hug him.

God, Izuku wants it.

But Izuku isn't like Present Mic. He's neither good nor naïve.

He knows what he deserves.

Chapter End Notes

> I'd apologize for all the angsty chapter endings, but they're sad, man. Rest assured, I have so many fluffy snippets already written, and we're getting close to the time where I can start sprinkling them in
>
> Izuku: I'm a villain

Yamada: Oh yeah? Name one crime.
Izuku: Uh,,, murder?
Yamada: Yeah, that's on me. I set the bar too low.

Tsukauchi: Why did you kill your father
Izuku: I had to, he was a train
Tsukauchi: That tracks

Discord: please have mic hug Izuku
Mic: *offers Izuku a hug*
Izuku: *rejects it*
Me: :))

More Memes!
Surya: X X X X X

Next chapter: Voice - Part II
Update: Jan. 14

Voice - Part II

Chapter Notes

> Surprisingly, there is no CW: Izuku this chapter, because Izuku is not in this chapter. But I'll give a CW: Bakugou, because I know how y'all feel about him.
>
> Now, for the Discord memes! Harvest was bountiful this week.
> Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X
> Cupcake: X
> Dev: X X X X X X X X X
> Finch: X X X X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So it's settled!" Nedzu declares from the table top he has made into his stage.

"No," the Commission representative protests. "Nothing has been settled at all. You've just given us another thing to think about." She stares, baffled, bereft of her previously unshakable composure, at the thick sheaf of paper in her hands. Nedzu had given them to Yagi to pass them out at the beginning of his presentation, a packet of Nedzu's own that thoroughly covers every detail of his proposition. The scheming rodent had likely been preparing the material since the moment Izuku showed up at the school gates three days ago.

"We can take a vote, then. That's what this committee is for, after all! Tsukauchi, would you like to do the honors?" Nedzu hops off the table, back into his chair, supposedly ceding the stage to Tsukauchi, though Shouta has no doubts about who exactly is controlling this situation. Tsukauchi blinks rapidly, gaining his bearings with a respectably professional smile that is only slightly strained around the edges.

"Of course," he says diplomatically. "We'll take a vote, then. Those in favor?" Shouta raises a casted arm without hesitation, relieved to see many others, Yagi among them, wisely following suit.

"All opposed?" A smaller number of hands go up, and Shouta hides a smug smirk in his scarf, as he pointedly avoids looking at that one particularly detestable Commission representative. He'd clocked her as a problem from the start, and there's a petty part of him that's

incredibly pleased to see her twisted into knots over Nedzu's plans.

"Abstentions?" To Shouta's side, Thirteen alone raises a meek hand.

"Alright," Tsukauchi says, "that's ten for, four against, and one abstention."

"What are the margins?" the representative asks, frowning sternly at one of her companions who had voted in favor.

"It's in the packet," Tsukauchi says drily, but then answers, "Two-thirds. The majority has it."

"This can't be allowed. UA is a high school, not a rehabilitation program. You don't have the resources."

Her protests are too little too late, Shouta knows. Nedzu is the type who always gets his way, sooner or later, and if he wants the kid, he's not going to let an opportunity like this slip through his graspy little paws.

"We're a hero school!" Nedzu chirps, with the cheer of someone who is getting exactly what they want. "There are few places better equipped to simultaneously protect, teach, and – if needs be – restrain a teenager like Midoriya Izuku. At UA he will be under heavy supervision, as is appropriate for his safety and the safety of others, but he will also be able to socialize with others his age."

"*Endanger* others his age, I think you mean," Endeavor corrects gruffly. Endeavor had, predictably, voted against Nedzu's plan. Shouta thinks of Todoroki Shouto – who had apparently found his way to the center of the action during the USJ Incident while Shouta was unconscious – and grits his teeth.

"I think he'll find it rather hard to endanger anyone when he's surrounded by pro heroes," Nedzu says. His voice is as cheerful as before, but it takes on the signature sharpness that so often makes people back down in the face of the rat's grin. "And if I'm wrong, we can discuss it at our check-in next week! I outlined the options for reassessment in the packet. The section starts on page 23." Endeavor glowers and pointedly does not touch the papers in front of him.

"Who is going to watch the boy?" one of the quieter commission representatives, the one who had voted in favor of the plan, asks. He flips back and forth between a few pages in his packet as he skims the information. "As a ward of UA, he'll need someone to house him, feed

him, clothe him and so on. It's well covered financially, and you have some good protocols in place, but there's no mention of *who* is actually going to be handling these responsibilities."

"With a staff of capable and qualified heroes at hand, it should be an easy enough position to fill."

"Still, it seems best to handle it now. His guardian should be subject to committee approval as much as the general plan is."

"A good point," Tsukauchi agrees. "Speak to your staff, compile a list of willing candidates, and we can meet again in a few days' time to discuss our options. Sound good?"

The reaction of the room is mixed. Those who were against Nedzu's proposition from the start seem even more aggrieved now, put out by the prospect of having to wrangle in yet another meeting to arrange a fate they don't agree with for a child they don't care about. Several who had voted in favor look annoyed as well, though less personally slighted then those who had voted against, and Shouta can't entirely blame them, given that he's not particularly enthusiastic about enduring another meeting so soon, himself. But for Shouta, impatience overshadows his irritation, a concern he sees mirrored in a handful of others around the room.

"What will be done with him in the meantime?" someone asks, a hero Shouta doesn't know personally, but recognizes from the group that has been monitoring the kid in the safehouse.

"I suppose we can just keep him where he is," Tsukauchi replies, a thoughtful and slightly hesitant frown twisting his mouth. The hero who asked grimaces slightly.

"I'm worried about keeping him in that environment. He hasn't been doing well." The other pro who has been watching over the kid – an incredibly short man with greying hair and a fierce expression that reminded Shouta a touch too much of Recovery Girl – nods in agreement.

"I'm afraid we don't have much choice on that front," Tsukauchi admits, an apology clear in his tone. "We need to identify possible guardians and fill them in on the situation – it's not a decision we can make unilaterally, even if it slows us down. Until then, the safehouse is the best place for him. Our only other option is a cell somewhere."

A conflicted silence settles over the room. Or, Shouta amends staring

at the tense eyebrows of possibly the worse Commission representative he's ever had the displeasure to meet, it's conflicted for approximately half the room. To the other half, the silence is irritated, impatient, and entirely ready to call this meeting over with.

Yagi shifts in his seat, his large frame making the legs of the chair squeak in protest beneath him. "I…" he clears his throat, "Perhaps I could take the boy in? I am UA faculty, after all…" Yagi trails off, staring out at the room with an uncertain expression that makes him look far smaller than he is.

"Who better to watch over a potential threat than the Symbol of Peace himself?" someone asks. Endeavor scoffs slightly, upper lift twitching slightly as he glares at the table in front of him. A louder scoff comes from the small man, an unabashedly derisive sound that makes Yagi flinch slightly.

"The boy's not qualified to take care of himself," the elderly hero proclaims, "much less a kid who's been through the likes of what Midoriya Izuku has been."

Yagi shrinks into himself, protesting weakly, "Surely it's better than leaving him where he is? At least until a more permanent option can be found."

Shouta gives Yagi points for offering. Obviously, he has internalized something from one of Shouta's many recent lectures, and the man has come a long way in a short time to now be advocating, however hesitantly, for a boy he wanted to imprison mere days ago.

So yes, it's good of Yagi to offer. But Shouta has to agree that the offer itself isn't particularly good. Thing is, Yagi is a bit like a golden retriever. Well-meaning and enthusiastic, certainly, but sometimes he wags his tail so hard he knocks things over, and he doesn't even notice. It's difficult to fault such a pure-hearted moron, but Shouta can practically guarantee that Yagi would just make a bigger mess of the situation, especially given his personal investment.

But leaving the kid in the safehouse sounds just as bad. Shouta has heard second-hand from Tsukauchi about the depression the Izuku has fallen into, about the way he oscillates between seeming like a shell of a person and being locked behind the teeth of guilt-grief-loathing. Even the man who makes All Might himself shrink like a scolded child with gruff words and a stern scowl seems concerned about the kid's mental health.

“I can take him.” The words escape Shouta before he has a chance to think about it, and he only fully processes what they mean when he hears them coming out of his own mouth. It is impulsive, the exact sort of thing he would deride someone else or, but he hears his own offer and can only agree with it.

“I’m sorry,” the Commission representative says, smiling widely, “but *who* exactly *are* you?”

“This is Aizawa Shouta,” Nedzu answers as Shouta silently catalogs the minute twitch of the woman’s eyebrows. “Also known as the pro hero Eraserhead, class 1-A’s homeroom teacher!”

“And why would *he* be a more qualified guardian than the *number one hero?”*

“For a start,” Shouta responds dryly, “I already have an actual fostering license. My quirk is Erasure – which as we already know, isn’t foolproof protection against Midoriya’s quirk, but it’s the most effective quirk-based counter we have. It’s also effective against both Shigaraki Tomura and Kurogiri, in the event they do stage another attack against us. I’m underground, so the kid won’t be subject to any excessive attention, like he would be under All Might’s care. I’ve been teaching kids with all kinds of powerful, dangerous, and uncontrolled quirks for over half a decade. And I’m married – which means there won’t be a worry about some disaster pulling me away and leaving the kid unsupervised. If I’m not available, my partner will be, and vice versa. Not to mention that he has undergone extensive training for dealing with trauma victims, far more than the token few lessons that are required of pro heroes.” Shouta delivers his entire pitch deadpan, but he takes private joy in the way the representative’s look slowly hardens through the course of it, until she is giving him an impressively vitriolic glare that he blinks at impassively.

“Well, your husband isn’t *here,”* she says, voice more controlled than her expression, though some spite still leaks into the hard emphasis of her words, “so this is irrelevant. He’d need to be briefed and willing the same as anyone else. This isn’t a decision that can be made unilaterally, after all.” She flashes him a smile that is more like a challenge. At the front of the room, Nedzu smiles as well, looking to Shouta for his response. Shouta smirks and doesn’t bother to hide it. The representative pales slightly, not quite as dramatic as the way Shouta’s students blanch at the look, but just as satisfying.

“If I had to guess, I’d say my husband it currently visiting the very kid

we're talking about. He's gotten a bit attached."

"Enough of this pissing contest," the short hero barks out. Shouta, content with the knowledge that he had *won* that pissing contest, turns his attention to the man easily while the representative scowls at the side of his head. "The point of this is to move the boy into a better environment. You think you can provide that?"

"I know we can," Shouta responds easily. "My husband – Yamada Hizashi, Present Mic – and I both have extensive experience with volatile quirks and traumatized children."

"Yamada assisted Midoriya through several panic attacks when he first arrived at UA," Tsukauchi says, "and I can confirm that he is currently visiting to check on him. From what I saw, Yamada was very good with the boy." Shouta's smirk softens slightly as pride leaks into it, though he doubts anyone around him can tell the difference, except perhaps for Nedzu, who always knows too much.

"And you're certain that Yamada would agree to this?" Yagi asks.

Shouta nods. "Hizashi's been hounding me to adopt for ages, anyway."

"There's a difference between adoption and taking in an at-risk child like Midoriya," the Commission representative says through grit teeth. "You don't bring someone a wolf when they ask for a puppy."

"Have you even seen this kid?" Shouta can't help but ask. "He *is* a puppy."

"*Puppies* don't steal over a hundred quirks and murder their fathers."

Shouta shrugs. "Puppies have teeth. They can bite." He sighs, propping his head on his casted fist, ignoring the slight ache of it as any energy he had to keep slogging through this woman's bullshit drains out of him all at once. "Regardless, Mic would parent a lost pigeon if given half the chance. Trust me, I know my husband." Shouta lets his eyes slide shut, not caring to see the scornful position the representative has no doubt folded her ridiculous eyebrows into.

Nedzu claps, the sound muffled by the pads of his paws, but still sharp enough to quiet the room. "It's sounds like we have a perfectly good solution in front of us! Let's put it to another vote!"

The old hag knocks exactly once on Katsuki's door before throwing it open, standing at the threshold with her hands on her hips and a glower on her face like she thinks she's hot shit. Groaning so loud he has to tip his head back to properly let out the sound, Katsuki drops the dumbbell he was doing reps with. It bangs, a short, hollow noise against the carpet, and his mother's glare intensifies.

"Cut that shit out. Do you *want* to break the floor?"

"The floor is fucking *fine*."

"Yeah, well it's not gonna be for long if you keep throwing your weights around, and you know who's going to pay to fix it? Not me, that's for sure."

"Oh my god," Katsuki growls. "What do you *want?"* She cuts him a look that he returns with equal venom. He swipes the back of his wrist over his forehead as sweat drips down his brow. There's no way she bust in here just to yell at him for something he hadn't even *done* yet. Not even his mother is that fucking ridiculous.

"Turn your music down," she demands.

"Hah? No way!"

"I've told you *three times* already to turn it down."

"I'm training!" Katsuki argues, gesturing broadly to his weights and the sweat that has coated his upper body.

"You've been training all week!" his mother responds, raising her voice to match his, yelling over the heavy drums of the music she hates so much. "I've let you have your way for this long, but I can hear this shit in the whole damn house and your father has a fucking headache. Turn it down! Or at least put on some headphones!"

"Headphones make my ears hurt!"

"Yeah? Well, this goddamned never-ending cacophony is making *my* ears hurt, so *turn it down*."

"Fucking fine!" Katsuki shouts. He stands, resisting the urge to kick his dumbbell across the room, knowing from experience exactly how that would go. "Whatever," he grumbles, jabbing viciously at the buttons

on his speaker until the music dies to a much more tolerable – and much less pumped-up, weaker, fucking lame-ass – level.

"Thank you. Was that so fucking difficult?" The old hag leans against the doorway, scowling fiercely. Then she closes her eyes, exhales hard through her nose, and forcibly softens the lines of her face. When she opens her eyes again, the anger there has mellowed, more of the "grit teeth" variety than the "throwing things" variety.

"We need to fucking talk," she says, volume reasonable for indoor use, but just barely. Katsuki glares harder. "Are you alright?" she asks after a moment, words stilted.

"What do you fucking *mean* 'am I alright?'"

"I *mean* that you've been acting – weird lately."

"Weird? I haven't been *weird*, what are you on?"

Her head thunks against the doorway as she reaches a hand up to tug through her hair. "Katsuki. Look, can I come in?"

"Don't come in!"

"I'm coming in. Sit down, brat, we're going to fucking talk, okay?" She sits on his bed, ignoring all his snarled protests, leaving Katsuki to collapse back down onto his bench, crossing his arms and grimacing at the tackiness of sweat cooling on his skin.

"Well?" he asks when she doesn't say anything more. "You're the one who wanted to *talk*."

"I know, I know, just give me a goddamned minute." She pauses to collect her thoughts, immune to Katsuki's impatient anger. "You've been training a lot, lately," she finally says.

"The fucking sports festival is coming up, you know that. I'm gonna win the whole thing, which means I need to *get ready*."

She stares at him for a long moment, eyes just like his own, but filled with complexities he can't pick apart. "And it's got nothing to do with what happened at the USJ?"

An explosion crackles against Katsuki's palm for a fraction of a second before he smothers it in his fist. He glares at the strained whiteness of his knuckles, suddenly unable to meet the old hag's eyes. He itches

with energy, the need to *do something*, the need to be better, and it crawls under his skin like torture.

The USJ was nothing. Is nothing. It's handled, is what it is. In the past. The heroes are going to catch *all* the villainous fuckers who were there and Katsuki will never have to see or even think about *any* of them *ever again.*

"What's that shit got to do with anything?" he asks, curling his lip in a sneer.

"You were attacked, Katsuki," she says, too soft and too close to pity. "You got hurt. Your teachers nearly died. You still haven't told me what happened."

"That's because there's nothing to fucking tell," Katsuki bites back, compensating for her softness by becoming sharper in turn. "Some villains got some big ideas and thought they could mess with us, but they *couldn't*. We were stronger than they were, and we fucking *won*. It's not a big deal."

"It sounds like a big deal to me. It sounds *scary* to me. I was so fucking scared when I heard what happened. And you haven't said a word about it!"

Katsuki grinds his teeth, back and forth, the harsh grate of them loud in his own ears. "That's because there's *nothing to say*. You might have been fucking scared, but I'm not some kind of *coward*. I'm a hero, I'm gonna be number one–"

"But you're not," the hag interrupts, leaning forward to slap her hand against his knee in a viper-quick motion that he doesn't move quick enough to dodge. "You're not a hero, you're not *anything* yet! You are a fucking fifteen-year-old who came home with a handprint bruised around his goddamned throat, and you want to tell me that your sudden fixation on getting stronger has nothing to do with that?"

"What do you want me to say?" he asks, without pulling his teeth apart. The old hag deflates slightly, rubbing a hand across her face with a tired sigh.

"I don't know. I just want you to talk to me. When did you stop *talking* to me, Kat?"

When did he *ever* talk to her? When had they ever talked without yelling? Maybe when Katsuki was young enough that she could pick

him up and run him around like he was flying. Maybe when was small enough that she could cage him in her arms and blow raspberries against his neck until he squealed. Maybe before his quirk came in and he realized that he was strong enough to protect himself, all on his own. Maybe before his quirk was taken and he realized that she never could have protected him, anyway.

Whenever it was, it was a long-ass time ago. Long enough that they could never go back, that was for goddamned sure.

“I love you, Kat,” she says when it’s clear that he’s not going to break the silence that has fallen between them. She sighs the words, like it’s some huge fucking struggle that she’s exhausted with. “I just want you to be happy, you know that, right?”

“You know what would make me happy?”

“What?” she asks. He meets her eyes, sees the hesitant resignation there, the tired exasperation of an “I love you” that has to be said as a sigh.

He wonders, for a moment, about proving her wrong. He could tell her some things, maybe. He could tell her about Izuku, at least.

But she’d just get pissed that he hadn’t told her sooner, and she would definitely end up taking Izuku’s side. She always did when they were younger and he’s sure that time hasn’t changed the immutable fact that his mother can’t see through Deku’s helpless veneer.

There’s no fucking point in explaining.

He peels his lips back from his teeth in a snarl. “I’d be happy if I could turn my goddamned music back up.”

The first thing Shouta does when he finally gets back to his apartment, after hours of the brain-numbing bureaucracy, is collapse onto the couch and flail his arms about – as much as he can with the casts – in search of a cat. Inquisitive whiskers brush against his fingers, followed in short order by a merciless set of teeth digging into the exposed tip of his thumb.

“Bastard,” he hisses, jerking away. Her teeth seem especially vicious when he can’t see them coming, once again bandage-blind, courtesy of Recovery Girl. Bastard yowls a ridiculous broken sound in response before galloping loudly away, bolting to and fro. There’s a dull clatter as she runs into god only knows what, then a short silence, likely as she revels in whatever destruction she has wrought, before she’s racing off again.

With Bastard making a racket on the other side of the room, Shouta reaches out again until a fluffy spine eventually raises itself beneath his hand. He scratches the cat for a moment before picking them up around the middle to drop the little monster on his chest. From Shouta’s position on the couch, with the limited movement of his arms, the manhandling is awkward, but Lucy tolerates it with only a small meow, content enough to curl up right where he was placed. Bastard yowls again. Disco screams back from another room.

“You’re my favorite child,” Shouta tells the fluffball nosing idly at his capture weapon. Lucy chirps, a sweet noise compared to the squall of his siblings.

“You’re not supposed to play favorites, Sho. You’ll hurt the others’ feelings.”

The relief that courses through Shouta at the sound of his husband’s voice is a balm on frayed nerves, soft and teasing and finally letting Shouta relax when he hadn’t even realized he was still tense. It’s still odd to Shouta, that a single person can immediately make everything simply *better,* just by being present, but he hopes to never take it for granted. He sighs, scratching behind Lucy’s ears when he butts against the plaster of Shouta’s palm.

“Pretty sure the only feeling Bastard is capable of is spite.”

Hizashi laughs, scooping Shouta’s legs up so he can sit beneath them. “Probably. But Disco’s sensitive, you know that. Did she bite you again?” Wordlessly, Shouta held up his hand, displaying the marks that were no doubt left behind by the menace. Hizashi clicks his tongue sympathetically. “At least she didn’t break skin this time!” Bastard, who Shouta is sure has a hunger for human flesh, hisses and knocks something over.

“How was the kid?” Shouta asks after a moment of silence. Hizashi’s thumb halts where it had been rubbing circles over the jut of Shouta’s ankle.

“I had hoped I would feel better after seeing him,” Hizashi admits quietly.

“I take it you don’t.”

Zashi flicks Shouta’s leg. “No, I don’t. Not one bit.”

“We knew he wasn’t doing well.”

“Knowing is different than seeing. He’s just – he’s so *small*, and *sad*, and it’s like he thinks he *deserves* to be that way. You know what he said, when I mentioned you? He said he wouldn’t *bother you* anymore. Bother you!” Hizashi’s voice grows louder with his distress, though he is careful to keep himself in check now more than ever, when Shouta can’t use Erasure to spare himself from the volume.

Shouta reaches out until he can just barely grasp Hizashi’s sleeve between the tips of his fingers, tugging at it until Zashi gets the hint and collapses against him. Lucy chitters as his spot on Shouta’s chest is stolen but hops away to settle near their legs without further protest. Yet another reason Lucy is Shouta’s favorite. In Lucy’s place, Disco would have either refused to move or tried to resettle on top of Hizashi’s head where it now rests against Shouta’s shoulder. And Bastard would have sooner clawed their eyes out than cooperated.

Shouta runs his fingers through Hizashi’s hair, pulling gently at the hair tie he finds there until it falls loose. Hizashi hums, but there is still a distracted note of concern to the sound.

“I offered him a hug and he said no.”

“I don’t blame him,” Shouta says, lighthearted in an attempt to ease the melancholy that has settled in his husband’s voice. “Not everyone likes hugs.” Hizashi wiggles his arms between Shouta and the couch, squeezing lightly, as if to prove a point.

“The little listener needs a hug.”

“…Probably,” Shouta agrees. “But just because he needs one doesn’t mean he’s ready to get one. Comfort won’t mean anything to him until he believes he’s safe.”

“He flinched,” Hizashi says at a whisper, words weighed nearly to silence by heavy sadness and remorse.

“He’s been through a lot. It will take time before he realizes that no

one here wants to hurt him."

"That's the thing, though. It didn't seem like he was afraid of *me*. It's like he was afraid of himself."

They already knew that was true, at least to an extent. The kid has expressed a plethora of negative opinions about himself, that he is dangerous being among them. After the things his father had forced him to do, Midoriya Izuku no longer seems to realize that he is capable of *not* harming people. Shouta has no doubt that Izuku would never simply *choose* to hurt someone, but the kid has been deprived of the choice for so long that he can't even grasp the fact that the decision is back in his hands – that not hurting someone can be as simple as not *wanting* to.

Hizashi sighs. "What about your meeting? Please tell me you've all found something better for him than that safehouse. He's wasting away in there."

Shouta carefully teases apart a knot in Zashi's hair, suddenly feeling incredibly out of his depth as theoreticals and reality begin to crash together. As knowing transitions to *understanding*, there is a moment of disorienting mental recalibration. Because knowing something – even accepting it, preparing for it, bracing yourself in every way you know how – is often meaningless when you find yourself face to face with the real thing for the first time.

Midoriya Izuku is going to come live with them, provided he agrees to the deal Nedzu has set up for him. A child who flinches from touch, not because of the things others have done to him, but because of the things *he* has done to others. A boy who loved his father and killed him anyway. A boy who loves his brother who is most likely going to try to kill him, next. A *kid*, a fifteen-year-old, the same age as Shouta's students who are still so care-free, young enough to see life as their playground.

And Shouta volunteered to take care of him, to protect him. Shouta. Shouta who works himself until he breaks, whose dietary staple is *jelly* because half the time he can't be assed to eat anything else, who survives by grabbing naps whenever he can because he can't sleep through the night. Shouta who heard this same kid crying at the USJ – so desperately in need of saving that he resorted to saving himself at a terrible cost – but couldn't do a damned thing to help because he was too busy getting the shit beat out of him to protect *anyone*.

Shouta's not qualified for this. He already failed the kid once, and that's not even bothering to get into his laundry list of character defects. He's a good teacher, maybe, but he's good at milking potential out of the kids who have it, good at giving reality checks to the ones who are too full of themselves, good at weeding out the ones who'll only end up ground to pulp beneath the heels of the hero industry. He's not particularly good *with* the kids, and the certainly don't find him *likable*, and there's a drastic difference between being a teacher and being a guardian – being a *parent*. Maybe Shouta is qualified for this on paper, but that's the thing, isn't it? The difference between knowing and understanding. Because Shouta might *know* how to do this, but he sure as hell doesn't *understand*.

"Sho?" Hizashi asks, concerned. He shifts until he is propped up on his elbows, rather than laying down. "Don't tell me they're sending him to jail. If they are, I want you to lie to me. Wait, no. Tell me the truth so I can hunt them down. Or break him out! There's no way–" Shouta forces himself to breathe, to think rationally as Hizashi riles himself up to go to war against the rest of the committee or stage a prison break or both.

Shouta made the right decision, and even if he didn't, it's been made. He will grow to understand, just like he has with all the other theoretical ideas that crashed full speed into his real world. And he has Hizashi, who already understands and who is far better with these things than Shouta ever will be. Hizashi, who still doesn't know what Shouta has done.

"He's not going to jail," Shouta says, interrupting Hizashi's rant, which has devolved into threats graphic enough that it's good Tsukauchi isn't around to overhear. "He'll be a ward of UA, so long as he agrees to the conditions."

Hizashi collapses back down, resting his chin on Shouta's sternum. "Well, why didn't you just say so! I probably should have guessed, with Nedzu involved. At least this way we'll be able to see him sometimes, huh? Make sure everything is going well. Maybe he'll finally let me give him that hug."

"Oh, we'll be seeing plenty of him. He's coming to stay with us."

There is a moment of silence, long enough that Shouta begins to wonder if he was too blunt. Then the windows rattle as Hizashi shrieks something that Shouta can't discern over the sudden ringing in his ears. All the cats dart around, startled and frantic and howling,

even Lucy, who digs his claws into Shouta's shin as he catapults himself from the couch. Without Erasure, all Shouta can do is slam his hands over Hizashi's mouth, probably with a touch too much force, considering the hard plaster encasing them, but Shouta's head feels like it's been cracked open across the eyes, so he can't bring himself to be particularly careful.

Hizashi cuts himself off, makes a barely-there sound of apology and disentangles from Shouta to retrieve some painkillers. Lucy and Disco both find corners somewhere to hide away until they deem the apartment safe again; Bastard, on the other hand, continues to ricochet around every inch of space available to her, like a bouncy ball from hell. Hizashi returns, dropping a few pills into Shouta's palm which he slams back dry after wiggling his bandages out of the way. Shouta lets his head fall back against the arm of the couch as he waits for the meds to kick in, Hizashi silently taking a seat on the floor next to him.

"To clarify," Shouta begins when the pain has died to a manageable ache, "that was a surprised and excited scream, right?"

"Yeah, Kitten, it was."

Shouta can hear the soft smile in Zashi's voice, and it's always a sound worth hearing, no matter how much it makes his head hurt.

Chapter End Notes

> Mantis, in collaboration with some others on the discord made an actual OC (X X) for one of my nameless, faceless extras (specifically the woman in the safehouse with Izuku last chapter). Her name is Sano Yumeka, hero name Floret, and she's got a plant quirk. At some point I will probably go back and make some small edits of the chapter to reflect this, but until then, just know that this is canon now. The discord has spoken
> And cupcake made us a soundtrack!
>
> Now, meme overflow because 5000 characters is simply not enough
> Cinnamon: X
> Eggs: X X X X X X X X X X X X
> Finch (part 2): X X X X
> Lena: X
> Lyn: X
> Mantis: X

Surya: X
Zombs: X
And one from me: X

Nedzu: Now the only question left is who Izuku going to live with.
All Might: I could –
Aizawa, signing adoption papers: You will NOT

Committee: *says stupid shit, asks stupid questions, is generally terrible*
Tsukauchi, mournfully: Did no one read the packets? Please, I spent an hour formatting them.

Aizawa: So you like the kid?
Yamada: Yeah, the little listener is great!
Aizawa: Oh thank god, 'cuz he's moving in tomorrow
Yamada: I'm sorry, whAT?!

Me, making human OCs: *no name, no quirk, no nothing. Doesn't matter, just there because I need someone to be there*
Me, making cat OCs: *names, appearances, personality, noises, complete backstories, I have all the details about these fucking cats, they're the new main characters*

Next chapter: Voice – Part III
Update: Jan. 21

Voice - Part III

Chapter Notes

CW: Izuku
This is the longest chapter since AFO part 2, all the way back when I still had no idea what this story was going to turn into.

Straight to the Discord memes, then
Alttu: X X X
Cinnamon: X
Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X X
Eggs: X X X X X X X X X X
Finch: X X
Fola: X X
Lyn: X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Izuku's fourth day in the safehouse, Tsukauchi does not come. Izuku eats the breakfast that is prepared for him, and then he returns to the bedroom until lunch. The clock ticks into late afternoon and Izuku remains uninterrupted, staring at the wall – it is probably ivory, he has decided – and gripping his mother's locket so tightly the broken hinge leaves a groove in the meat of his thumb.

Still, Tsukauchi doesn't come. But Present Mic does. He stands in the doorway, grinning as Izuku gapes.

Izuku never expected to see Present Mic again. At the end of their last meeting, just yesterday, the hero had promised he would come back, but Izuku was sure he would either forget or Izuku would be moved before then.

"Hey Little Listener," the man says, as he enters the room. This time he makes for the desk chair instead of the bed, but rather than sit in it, he slots his arm through the back and picks it up. "Mind joining us in the living room?"

"Us?" Izuku echoes, mindlessly taking his feet. He feels so unbalanced it's a miracle he can stand straight, but the world doesn't tip sideways the way it seems like it should, and the ground is solid beneath his feet.

"Yep! You're a popular one." Present Mic lowers his glasses enough to

offer Izuku an exaggerated wink, then walks back to the door, chair in tow. He knocks the legs of it against the doorframe as he goes. "Yikes," he says, rubbing his fingers against the wood as if that will remove the scuffs he just put in. "You didn't see that!"

Izuku hesitates for a moment, standing next to the bed and staring dumbly after the hero who whirled into the room out of nowhere and then back out just as abruptly. When Tsukauchi had not come that day, Izuku had assumed that it was over. That there were no more questions to ask. No more details to carefully pry from the resistant vice of Izuku's jaws. No more pitying looks, no more pseudo-comfort. And he had assumed that that meant he would soon be escorted to whatever cell he would be spending the rest of his life in. Probably somewhere deep underground, where he would only see passing guards until the day Tomura found a way inside to put an end to everything.

This visit, with winks and casual property damage, never featured in Izuku's imaginings of what would happen next. This is not a part of Izuku's plan, not even meant to be a part of the tenuous limbo he has found himself in.

He follows Present Mic with cautious steps, into the living room to face the rest of his – visitors? There, at the small table where Izuku eats his meals, sits Eraserhead and Nedzu. Izuku freezes again in the doorway, watching with wide eyes as Present Mic places his stolen seat next to Eraserhead, flopping into it and resting his chin in one hand as he sprawls the other arm across the table. He grins at Eraserhead, who glares at him with bloodshot eyes that just barely peek out between the seams of his bandages. Nedzu stands in his own chair at Eraserhead's other side, head fully cresting the table, but barely.

The principal grins as he catches sight of Izuku, small, pointed teeth catching the light with a vicious glint. "Izuku! Come, take a seat!" He nods to the lone empty chair at the table.

Wordlessly, Izuku does as he is told, moving on autopilot as he still struggles to catch up with the situation he has found himself in. He crosses the room carefully, silently watching the heroes in front of him. Present Mic turns away from Eraserhead to give Izuku another bright smile, cheek squashed against his fist and glasses slightly askew. With the attention of all three heroes on him, Izuku feels impossibly heavy, like he is about to crumple beneath the force of his own gravity. He resists the urge to fold in on himself, glancing quickly

between Present Mic's amicable smile, the red rimming Eraserhead's barely-visible eyes, and the glint of light across Nedzu's teeth.

"First of all," Nedzu begins, "we have something that belongs to you. Mic?"

"Right!"

Present Mic glances around for a quick moment, then leans over Eraserhead, ignoring the short noise of protest, to scoop something off the floor. He hefts it up with a triumphant cry, slinging it onto the table. Izuku's backpack thuds against the wood and slides slightly across the surface. Half-unzipped, several notebooks jar loose, one of which tumbles straight into Nedzu's waiting paws.

"Hizashi," Eraserhead scolds flatly. Present Mic shrugs his shoulders with a sheepish laugh. Izuku watches the small exchange with saucer-wide eyes.

"Volume 17," Nedzu reads. Izuku's attention snaps to him as he flips open the book. "This is one of my favorites!"

"I'm sorry," Izuku blurts, eyes locked onto the damning spread of pages in Nedzu's paws.

"Are we doing apologies again?" Eraserhead asks dryly. "In that case, I'm sorry for erasing your quirk the way I did in the infirmary. I didn't realize there would be any kind of backlash on you."

Suddenly, Izuku does not know where to look. The notebooks and Eraserhead demand his attention in equal measure. Izuku's eyes dart frantically between the two – from the hero he wronged, back the book that proves to just how many others he did the same – never able to settle on one before the need to address the second itches at him again.

Izuku presses his tongue to the dry roof of his mouth. "What? N-no, I – the b-books…"

"Are quite impressive," Nedzu fills in, not at all what Izuku had been intending to say. Izuku bites down the contrary noise that tries to leap from his mouth. "Do you use one of the intelligence quirks in your repertoire when you put together these analyses?"

"I – n-no, no." Izuku half reaches out to snatch the book away but thinks better of it before the movement can become anything more

than a twitch of his already-shaking hands. “I don’t – there’s n-nothing sp-special about i-it.”

“Did All for One have you make these profiles?”

Izuku thinks, with rising dread, about the number of heroes he has written about in those books. Practically every hero he has ever seen has been catalogued in some capacity, varying from mere lines to entire pages of notes and breakdowns, depending on how much information was available to him. And then there were the quirks that didn’t belong to heroes at all – the quirks that belonged to victims, stolen away by either Izuku or his father and then immortalized and dissected on paper.

He knew the police had the notebooks, knew they had already been filed in the evidence against him. He had handed them over without a single word of argument. At the time, he hadn’t minded turning them in. In a strange way, it felt like severing a limb, giving up the books that he had spent practically his whole life working on, but he knew the information was better off in hands that wouldn’t abuse it.

Now, though, confronted directly, Izuku feels sick with shame. Many of the pages in those books had never been seen by All for One. They were Izuku’s, and Izuku’s alone. But there were over twenty books in the bag, hundreds of quirks within their pages, and the analysis there had resulted in enough deaths that Izuku had lost count.

“I-it’s just a h-hobby,” he says, weakly. “My f-fa-fa – no, m-most of them were j-just for m-me. For – for *fun*.” He chokes on the word. Izuku’s not proud to have built entertainment from death and destruction, but quirk analysis is a lure he has never been able to resist, even when it meant doubling down on his crimes, adding insult to injury. Like a sociopathic scientist, deaf to the screams of those he studies.

“It’s rare for someone your age to enjoy analysis of this nature, not to mention of this quality.”

“Nedzu,” Eraserhead interjects, just as tears begin to well in Izuku’s eyes.

“Ah,” Nedzu replies, smile turning thoughtful as he assesses Izuku. “You’re not in trouble! I meant it when I said I was impressed. I’ve looked these over extensively and you have quite the gift, Izuku!”

Confused, Izuku blinks – once, twice, eyelashes matting together as his

tears spill over, even as his distress is displaced with disorientation. Present Mic shuffles around, patting over his jacket and crowing as he pulls something from one of his pockets. He slides the item – a small pack of tissues – across the table to Izuku with a satisfied grin.

“I don’t un-understand,” Izuku admits, picking the packet up and pulling a tissue from it to worry between his fingers.

“Have you ever thought of putting your skills to use?”

“Skills?”

“Like the analysis!”

“I – I tried – o-only s-sometimes. W-when T-Tom-mura n-need m-me to, b-but–”

“I don’t mean to use for the League,” Nedzu interrupts. “I mean for yourself. Have you ever considered being an analyst?”

“…What?” Something in Izuku’s voice, thin and lost as it is, makes Nedzu stop and think for a moment, smiling fading into a more serious, considerate stare, that is no less unnerving.

“I suppose what I’m asking,” he says slowly, “is what you want to be when you grow up. What are your dreams, Izuku?”

Izuku is still crying, tears flowing sluggishly, but he is no longer sure why. He’s not sure of much at all at the moment, feeling unmoored in the face of Nedzu’s question as he picks apart the tissue in his hands. Tiny shards of fiber flutter slightly across the table with each of Izuku’s exhales. He feels a little bit like those bits of tissue paper. Thin and fragile, fuzzy around the edges, insubstantial like he might float way or dissolve to shreds.

His dreams? These days, Izuku has only been having nightmares, but he knows that’s not what Nedzu is referring to. His *hopes?* Izuku tries to think back.

When is the last time Izuku imagined the future and thought of anything other than blood and tears? Why would he bother, when it had nothing else to offer him?

“I don’t know,” he says. The confession echoes around his chest, bouncing between his ribs like his insides are some cavernous space, vast and empty.

“Skills like yours could be incredibly useful in heroics, you know.”

“No,” Izuku denies automatically. “I can’t be a hero.”

“Nedzu,” Eraserhead cuts in sharply.

Simultaneously, the principal himself asks, “Why not?”

“I’m a villain,” Izuku replies helplessly, looking between the two – the mummified glare of Eraserhead, the Mona Lisa smile of Nedzu. “I’m going to jail.”

“You’re *not* going to jail,” Eraserhead corrects, tone firm enough that Izuku can only blink and turn the words over in his head, argument stricken from his tongue. He tries to find an angle to look at them that will make them *make sense*, but everything just gets more tangled up as he does, twisting together into a jumbled mass of *nonsense* that makes Izuku’s head hurt. Childishly, he wants to cover his ears, to sing loudly to himself until his own voice blocks out all these statements that he can’t make sense of.

“What about when you were little?” Present Mic asks, drawing Izuku’s attention away from the unreadable expanse of bandages that mask the nuance of Eraserhead’s expression, from that slight sliver of eye that pierces Izuku through. “What did you want to do then?”

Izuku thinks back again, farther this time. Long back, before he knew too well how blood felt between his fingers. Back before his mother was taken from him, followed soon after by whatever remained of his innocence. Before his quirk came in, and the world grasped him hard by the shoulders and taught him that not all men were created equal.

“I… wanted to h-help people.”

“That’s what heroes do,” Present Mic says, smiling gently. For the first time since Nedzu started speaking, Izuku’s mouth firms from its confounded slackness, pulling into a brittle frown.

“No,” he says, too harsh. “That’s what they’re *supposed* to do.” He regrets the words the moment they escape him, flinching forward just a fraction of an inch, as if he can reach out and snatch them back out of the air. Present Mic’s smile falls away, and Izuku finds that the hero is even harder to look at when he is frowning.

“You’re right, kid,” Eraserhead says. Izuku looks to him sharply, the agreement putting him instantly on edge. “We don’t always do our

jobs as well as we should."

Izuku backtracks. "T-that's not–"

"No, it's true. There are too many people out there who don't get the help they need. Even heroes are only human. We can't be everywhere; we can't know everything. Can't save everyone. Not to mention that some of us don't have our priorities in order, to begin with. But that doesn't make it any better for the people we fail. Right now, we're trying not to fail you."

"Me?"

"Yes, *you*. Nedzu, cut to the chase."

"Of course!" Nedzu exclaims, cheerful composure unshaken by Eraserhead's curt tone. "Yesterday, a committee of heroes, officers, and members of the HPSC met to discuss where you will go from here."

"Not jail?" Izuku asks, still dubious, cutting his eyes to Eraserhead. He feels as if gravity has been reversed, like any moment now he is going to fall up out of his chair, tumbling head over heels into the sky. Then, when everything is set back to sorts, back to the way it should be, reality will come crashing down, and it will bring him with it until he is nothing but a red splatter on the pavement.

"Not jail!" Nedzu confirms.

"Then where…?"

"You have two options in front of you. I am here to offer you a deal, but should you not like it, the HPSC will take custody of you."

Izuku tenses. In his five years with his father, Izuku had learned all about the flaws in their hero-centric society, though he never quite grew to hate heroics as a whole, the way Tomura had. The system is flawed, deeply and inherently, but many of the people who participate in it do so with the best of intentions, wanting to help people, the same way Izuku himself had once craved so fervently. But the Hero Public Safety Commission is a different beast entirely, and Izuku knows enough about their inner workings – more than they would ever want him to know, he is sure – to detest them entirely. Nedzu watches Izuku's reaction with sharp eyes, and Izuku meets the beady gaze, swallowing thickly.

“And your deal?”

“It’s simple!” Nedzu responds, eyes glinting, as he produces a thick sheaf of paper from seemingly nowhere, passing it to Present Mic who, in turn, hands it to Izuku. It is heavy in Izuku’s palms, looking and feeling anything but *simple*. “You’ll become a ward of UA. I’ll take over your education, to assess your skills and guide you on the right path.” Eraserhead scoffs, but Izuku stares at the papers in front of him with tears once again burning against the backs of his eyes.

“UA?” he asks, tracing a shaking finger over the two large and bold letters at the top of the page. Ink bleeds slightly as a tear drips from his chin onto the typing.

“UA,” Present Mic says. He leans into Eraserhead with a small, crooked smile.

It has been a long time since Izuku had dreams, but he was full of them, once. He dreamed of helping people, saving them, being a *hero*. UA was always at the center of those dreams, golden and bright.

Once, Izuku had dreamed of helping people. It was a dream like the sun – warm and shining, far away but still in sight. But then he hurt people, more and more, until it seemed almost impossible that he could ever help anyone at all, and he was locked away in some cold place where light could never reach him. Now, if Izuku is being painfully honest with himself, the only thing he can still dream of is to someday simply be *good*. It is a dream more like a nightmare – cracked nails on bleeding fingers, scrabbling at dirt as he tries to dig his way out of a grave of his own making.

For years, Izuku had thought that his dreams were dead, killed by his own hand. So he had buried himself with them, had stopped bothering to dream at all. What was the point, when he knew exactly what the future had in store for him? He would never be a hero, would never be anything more than the villain of his own story. He resigned himself to days of blood and theft and freezing cold.

But he has ended that cycle, hasn’t he? Painfully, in a way he is sure he will regret for the rest of his life, but ended, nonetheless. He will never go back to the warehouse again.

When Izuku decided to write his own story, he had planned to make a single change. Make a scalpel his pen and scratch out his father’s name. That was all. That alone was enough to domino into massive differences down the line – happy endings where there would have

been tragedies. Happy endings that would make it all worth it, even if Izuku didn't get one of his own. His story has always been a tragedy, after all.

Izuku turns pages with fingers he cannot feel, skimming over words that look hazy through the film of tears over his eyes. It is not simple, what they are offering him. And it is not forgiveness. But simple forgiveness isn't what Izuku wants, and it certainly isn't what he deserves. No, they are giving him a chance to *earn something*.

He reads and a bubble grows in his chest, something golden-bright that feels a lot like dreams used to. Something a little like a sunrise.

"I can be a hero?" Izuku asks softly, staring at the bold and capitalized heading: **SPORTS FESTIVAL**. All three of the others at the table answer his barely-there question at once, a chorus of affirmation that makes Izuku's ears ring.

Izuku reads the word "rehabilitation" so many times that it starts to look like "redemption."

The safehouse falls into silence, broken only by the whisper of turning pages and the stutter-gasp of breath that is thick with tears. The kid reads and rereads, bottom lip trembling as he soundlessly mouths the occasional sentence to himself. A crease has settled between his brows. Against Shouta's side, Hizashi's weight becomes heavier as the silence stretches, but he resists the urge he must be feeling to break it and rolls his lip between his teeth, as quiet as the rest of them.

Nedzu's proposal is lengthy and dense. It's not the kind of thing Shouta would have expected the kid to read and process on his own, but Nedzu seems content to simply watch Izuku's reactions rather than to guide him through anything. Shouta stares at the dimple between the kid's brows, deep and unwavering. It speaks less of a confusion on the *what* and more on the *why*; understanding the contents of what has been put before him, but not *believing* it.

Through the confusion, disbelief, and despair that still cling to every edge of the kid, it is hard to predict what he is going to say. Certainly, the problem child is thinking he doesn't deserve this. Shouta can guess that much. But does he *want* what Nedzu is offering? If he does, which

is more important to him – wanting or deserving? Will he prioritize the desire, or will he deprive himself of this opportunity the same way Hizashi fears he deprives himself of comfort?

Each rustle of paper as the kid flips back and forth between pages has something winding tighter in Shouta's chest. Anxiety churns in his stomach at the thought of Izuku saying yes, coming home with them, relying on them. Shouta doesn't want to fail the kid again, but he doesn't even know where to start in order to succeed.

Worse than that anxiety, though, is the dread that bubbles in his lungs like tar at the thought of the kid saying *no*. Of disappearing behind the concrete, steel, and red tape of the Commission, where the closest thing to comfort he will be offered is raised eyebrows, like he is some trivial curiosity. Locked up and locked away, not even railing against the injustice of it, because it's exactly what he thinks he *deserves*.

Shouta would rather fail the kid a million times over than sit by and watch as Izuku fails himself.

Beneath the table, Zashi squeezes Shouta's knee tightly enough that Shouta can feel his nails through the fabric of his pants. Unable to squeeze back, Shouta jogs his leg once in acknowledgement. Nedzu pats his paws silently on the edge of the table, smiling as serenely as ever, apparently unaffected by the unease saturating the air.

"So what happens n-next?" Izuku eventually asks, voice hesitant in the thick air. He runs his thumb along the side of the packet, a quick shuffle of the pages. "Where do w-we start?"

There is another quiet moment as everyone process the unspoken implication in the kid's words. Shouta's anxiety ramps up into a rolling boil but the tar drains from his lungs, a sweet relief that allows him to breath freely without the air getting stuck in his chest. Hizashi muffles an excited noise against his palm, bouncing slightly in his seat and madly shaking Shouta's knee. The burst of energy, as contained as it is by Zashi's standards, startles Izuku, who flinches slightly before freezing in place, taut and trembling for a moment before he cautiously relaxes again. Shouta knocks his temple again his husband's with a quelling glare.

"You'll come to stay with us," Shouta says, catching the kid's wary eyes. "Either today or tomorrow, if you want some time to think."

"…With you?"

“With us!” Hizashi exclaims, pulling his hand away from his mouth the reveal the wide grin that has taken up residence there. As Zashi once again begins to vibrate with excitement, voice a touch too loud, Shouta locks their ankles together and jostles his leg. Hizashi’s smile takes on a slightly abashed tint but doesn’t dim as he shakes his hands out and settles back into his chair. Izuku stares at the pair of them – how close Hizashi placed their chairs together, how Hizashi leans into Shouta until their arms are pressed together, how casually Shouta allows the contact – with realization dawning in his eyes. His lips purse, twist into a conflicted curve.

“But I – W-why would you…”

Shouta shrugs, cavalier and completely constructed, concealing his concern. “You need somewhere to stay. We have the room.”

“I… I can’t…”

Shouta’s stomach plumets as the kid trails off. He takes a deep breath, forces himself not to reveal anything, and pointedly avoids looking at Hizashi, not wanting to see the frozen-fake smile that must be on his face, now.

“If you’re not comfortable with us, we can find a replacement,” Shouta says, gruff but composed. “The sports festival is only ten days away, so you’ll want to get started ASAP if you plan to participate. Your lessons with Nedzu begin on Monday, so you’ll still need to stay with us in the interim, but it will probably only take a handful of days to find someone.”

“Why wo-would you… A-Af-After w-what I d-did–”

Hizashi cuts off the stuttering with a small noise of understanding. He reaches across the table, resting a hand near Izuku’s, which is fisted around a crumpled edge of Nedzu’s proposal. Hizashi makes no move to actually touch the kid, leaving an inch or two between them, and Izuku stares at that gap, trepidation dripping from his eyes as freely as his tears.

“Do you remember what I said yesterday, kiddo? Shouta’s not mad at you. Neither am I. We both just want to help you. *We’re on your side*.” Hizashi’s voice is soft – tender and gentle. It is the kind of voice that most people would not think a notoriously exuberant man like Present Mic capable of, if they didn’t hear it for themselves. It is also what Shouta thinks of as Zashi’s most sincere, most genuine voice. No jokes, no production, no flare. Just words that mean something, given like

gifts to people who need them.

The kid's fingers spasm, dropping the papers he spent so long pouring over. For the briefest moment, he is reaching out, shaking and scared. Hizashi closes the gap in an instant, curling his fingers around Izuku's, letting Izuku's close around his. The kid stares at their joined hands, gaze wide and wild, like some horrible atrocity has happened right before his eyes. His arm flinches back slightly at the shoulder, as if he is about to tear himself away, but his fingers convulse tighter around Hizashi's hand.

"I don't understand," he whispers. The confession is threadbare, worn thin by frustration and uncertainty.

"I know. I know it doesn't make any sense, right now. But if you come with us, maybe we can figure it out together, huh?"

Izuku continues to stare at his and Hizashi's joined hands. His nails dig into the back of Hizashi's gloves. He sniffles, his breath hiccups, and he stares, fingers flexing but never releasing. A spark lights in his eyes, bringing the green of them to life for the first time Shouta has seen. They are still dim, still glazed, and the kid himself still looks listless and washed out, like the world has dug its teeth into him and shaken him about, but there is a fire inside him.

And if you give a fire fuel, it *will* grow.

Eraserhead can and will sleep anywhere and Present Mic is not a particularly good singer.

Izuku learns both of these things within the first fifteen minutes of the car ride to the heroes' home. The home that they share, since they are not only coworkers, classmates, or friends, as Izuku first assumed. The home they are welcoming Izuku into, easily, *happily* even, as if they are glad to have his black hole being sucking all their light away.

Present Mic taps without rhythm on the steering wheel. He sings just slightly louder than most people would be able to comfortably manage, but not so loud that it hurts Izuku's ears or keeps Eraserhead from resting his head against the window and immediately passing out. Every note Present Mic sings is at least slightly off key, but he

knows all the words to each song that comes on.

Izuku is grateful for the noise. So many of his thoughts live in the space between sounds, vicious things that set upon him in the silence, crowding between his ears like high frequency vibrations that make his teeth sting and his eyes feel like they're going to burst. He lets the noise wash over him and revels in its mindlessness, the way it keeps his head full and doesn't hurt at all.

Eraserhead and Present Mic's apartment building is on UA grounds, a relatively small building on the edge of the school's expansive campus, where faculty, staff, and even the occasional student can choose to live if they don't want to find other housing in the area. The apartment building itself is unimpressive, but UA is visible in the near distance.

Izuku stumbles out of the car on stiff legs, feeling pathetically small as he stares over at the imposing jut of the school's four main structures. Early evening sun glints off the windows, reflecting warm light that is gradually darkening from yellow to orange.

"Come on, Sho," Present Mic says as he opens Eraserhead's door. "Up you get!" Eraserhead groans, glowering through his bandages and the mess of his hair. Present Mic grins brightly, impervious to the other man's dark expression or grumbling, grabbing his elbow as he stands to help him keep his balance.

"Hope you like cats," Eraserhead says, looking briefly to Izuku where he hovers aimlessly behind them. Without further word, he turns and proceeds into the building. He walks slightly crooked, not fully able to conceal the pain in his gait. Present Mic watches Eraserhead go with a click of his tongue.

Abruptly, he turns to Izuku, clapping his hands together. "Alright! Let's get you settled in, yeah?" Izuku stares, wide eyed and silent, mouth clamping down on any words before he can even think to say them. "Yeah! I can take your bag for you–" Izuku has his backpack with his notebooks slung over his shoulders and a duffle bag with clothes he was told to take from the safehouse, both of which he clutches at, shaking his head "– or not! That's fine, too! Just follow me, okay?"

Follow. Izuku can do that. Simple, easy, no need to think about anything at all. He nods. Present Mic smiles and Izuku tries to forget the feeling of warm, tight pressure that has settled into the bones of

his hand like a craving.

Present Mic leads them to an apartment on the second floor, opening the door with gravitas and gesturing for Izuku to go inside. Izuku skirts carefully past him, toeing off his shoes – red, so red, they were full of blood, you just couldn't see it – and pressing himself immediately to the closest wall as he surveys his surroundings.

Izuku doesn't know what he expected. Perhaps he is still so caught up in his disbelief of being here at all that anything would have surprised him. Regardless, it catches him off guard to find himself in a completely normal apartment. A living room with a couch and a couple of chairs, a table, a TV. A kitchen, separated from the living room by a counter with a few stools. A wide window over the sink with a couple of plants on the sill. A hallway, presumably leading to bedrooms and the bathroom.

The only abnormal thing about the space is Eraserhead himself, who stands near the couch, shoulders hunched in as he pins a squirming cat to his chest. The animal twists in his grip like it doesn't have bones, tangling itself up in his capture weapon and complaining loudly every few seconds, a sound like it's gargling rocks. It chews on one of the hero's casts, attacks moving up and down along the length of plaster until it manages to dig into one of Eraserhead's exposed fingers.

"U-Um," Izuku looks back to Present Mic, who is closing the door with nonplussed look. "E-Eraserhead, sir, w-what…?"

"Bastard," Eraserhead hisses. The cat hisses back. Izuku shoots another frantic look to Present Mic, who meets his eyes this time, mouth twitching as he suppresses a smile. "Not you, kid, I'm talking to the cat."

"O-oh. Well, uh, s-sir–"

"Don't call me sir."

Izuku's mouth clicks shut. Present Mic, obviously holding back laughter, crosses his arms and leans against the wall. Izuku would try to edge his way closer to the door, but he'd have to pass in front of Present Mic to do that, and surely the hero would notice, so he stays exactly where he is, rooted to the spot.

"Why did you even pick her up?" Present Mic asks, words trembling with his amusement.

“Didn’t want her biting the kid.”

“How’s that going for you?”

“Well, she’s not biting the kid, is she?”

“Present Mic, sir,” Izuku begins weakly, unsure of what he is meant to say or do.

Present Mic turns to him with a friendly grin. “No sir for me, either! Name’s Yamada Hizashi! You can call me Hizashi, Yamada, Zashi – whatever you’re comfortable with. Sho, just put her down, she’ll be fine.”

Grumbling in a manner slightly too reminiscent of the cat in his arms, Eraserhead drops the animal. It’s off in a shot, whistling like a teakettle, as it charges straight for Present Mic, takes several laps around his ankles, crashes into the wall, then zooms off to disappear down the hallway.

Izuku wonders if all cats are like that. He’s never had one of his own. His mother was allergic, and Tomura never liked animals, so he’s only ever seen alleyway strays. It’s hard to believe that cats would be so popular if that’s what they’re like, but Eraserhead and Present Mic don’t seem to find anything abnormal about the situation.

Present Mic snaps his fingers, spinning away from the wall to stand in front of Izuku. “Okay, how about this! I’ll show you your room, you can put your stuff down, and then we’ll talk business. Sound good?”

When Izuku nods, Present Mic leads the way down the hall, walking backwards as he gives a brief narration of the space. He nearly trips over a stray cat toy but recovers with the grace Izuku would suspect of a pro hero, reflexes kicking in immediately.

“Saw that,” Eraserhead says from where he has collapsed on the couch.

“No, you didn’t!” Present Mic calls back. He raps a quick fist on one of the doors they pass. A growl bubbles up from the other side. “This is Bastard’s closet! Don’t go in there!” Izuku only realizes that there is a cat flap in the door when Present Mic sidesteps the paw that swipes out of it. “And this,” Present Mic continues, pushing open a slightly ajar door, “is your room!”

There is a banner hung on the wall over the bed, a sting of silver

bubble letters that loudly proclaims, “IT’S A BOY!” each word separated by a bright blue heart. There’s confetti scattered around the room, flecks of white and blue breaking up the otherwise pristine neatness of a well-kept but unused guest room. Present Mic groans, half a complaint and half a laugh as he crosses the room to start swiping the debris off the bedspread while Izuku lingers in the doorway.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says. “Nemuri – uh, that is Kayama Nemuri, Midnight, she’s a friend of ours. Anyway, she found out about you last night – because I *may* have had a little incident with my quirk that shook the entire building when Sho told me – and she never misses an opportunity to try to give Sho some grey hairs, you know?”

Of course, Izuku does not know in the slightest. He has never had many friends to begin with, and these days he has none at all. But the question was rhetorical, so he nods anyway. Still brushing off the blankets, Present Mic picks up a piece of confetti, squints at it, pulls a face, then flicks it across the room.

He clears his throat. “Anyway, we can vacuum all this up in a bit. For now, just put your stuff down and we’ll go back out and talk. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Izuku returns after a moment. Present Mic seems enthused by the response, despite the hesitant way Izuku spoke.

In the living room, Eraserhead is still laying on the couch, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Only a few minutes have passed, definitely not enough for the hero to have fallen asleep, but he certainly does a great job of looking as if he has. Present Mic leans over the back of the sofa and whispers something that causes Eraserhead to snort loudly.

“Of course she did,” he says, not opening his eyes. Present Mic snickers. “It’s not funny.”

“No, no, not even a little,” Present Mic agrees, serious for half a second before breaking into giggles that he muffles against the couch cushions. Eraserhead huffs a laugh of his own, nearly knocking heads with Present Mic as he sits up.

“Hey, kid – come sit down.” He inclines his head towards the side of the couch his legs just vacated. Izuku sits in the far corner, pulling his knees up with him.

“I’ll start dinner,” Present Mic says. “You give him the lowdown.” Present Mic presses a kiss to the top of Eraserhead’s hair, and Izuku

watches this exchange the same way he has watched all their others, an attentive intruder.

“You want us to call you Izuku, right?” Eraserhead asks as Present Mic, already humming under his breath, walks towards to kitchen.

Izuku’s conflicted feelings on the topic of his name have not resolved in the slightest, still churning around in his gut, a million questions about who he is, and who he was, and who he wants to be all overlapping and unanswered. But, at this point, he is accustomed enough to the uncomfortable sensation that he only hesitates for a moment before nodding.

“Y-yes, sir.”

“No sirs. No Eraserheads, either. Just call me Aizawa. Or Shouta.”

When the hero says nothing more, Izuku realizes he is waiting for a response and shifts uncomfortably. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Eraserhead sighs. His eyes, far too intense for how concealed they are, burn against Izuku’s skin. Izuku closes his mouth, catching his lip between his teeth. He has already messed up, hasn’t he? He doesn’t know how to navigate this minefield of names and foreign domesticity and – and *cats*.

“We’ll work on it,” Eraserhead decides, finally turning his scorching gaze away, looking to the kitchen where Present Mic sways to the music in his head. “Until then, at least call me Eraser. It’s shorter. You can call Hizashi Mic. Is that better?”

“Yes. E-Eraser.” It still feels stiff and unnatural to say, but as long as Izuku can force it out of his throat, he’ll bear it.

“Moving on to the cats, then. We’ve got three. You’ve met Bastard.”

“H-her name is…” Izuku trails off.

“Bastard,” Eraserhead – Eraser – repeats. Izuku buries his grimace in his knees. “It used to be Feral Bastard, but she got less feral after a few years so now she’s just Bastard.”

“Less… feral?” Izuku stares dubiously down the hallway, where an occasional clatter floats out of the closet.

“Oh, yeah. She’s mostly harmless, now. She *will* bite you, but that’s just what she does. She usually doesn’t break skin.” Eraser has several

raw marks around his fingers, beaded up with blood, that beg to differ, but Izuku doesn't point out the inconsistency. "If she tries to scratch you, then she's actually mad, leave her alone. Mostly just stay away from her closet and you'll be fine.

"The other two are Disco and Cumulus – we just call him Lucy. Pretty sure they're off hiding somewhere. They're not going to give you any problems, Bastard is the problem cat. Hizashi or I'll point them out when they show themselves. What else…"

"Business!" Present – no, just Mic – prompts from the kitchen.

"Right. Well, the important stuff was all covered in Nedzu's proposal. If you want or need anything, ask me or Hizashi. He's probably going to try to drag you out shopping tomorrow to get you some more clothes and stuff for your room, but if that's too much too soon, I can run interference for you. At UA, you'll be under the supervision of one of us or Nedzu. Only approved quirk use, so those suppressant bands will need to stay on most of the time. They're not giving you any problems, are they?" Izuku shakes his head. "Can you show me?"

Izuku stretches his arm out, twisting his wrist back and forth under Eraserh– Eraser's attentive gaze. After four days, there is a small red mark on of each of Izuku's wrists, where the metal of the bands occasional rubs against the jut of bone there. The abrasion isn't bad at all, a minor irritation that Izuku hardly notices, lost in the shadow of the pain in his chest, but Eraser still tsks in disapproval.

"We'll talk to Recovery Girl on Monday, see if she can help with that," he says as Izuku draws his wrists back into his lap, hiding them behind his knees. What's the big deal, Izuku wonders, staring at that small red spot. It's not as if it hurts, not really. "It might not seem like much now," Eraser adds, as if reading Izuku's mind, "but it'll get worse if we just leave it. She'll want to check on you, anyway. How's your shoulder?"

"My shoulder?"

"You were shot a week ago," Eraser says, deadpan.

A dull ache pulses through Izuku's shoulder at the reminder, echoing down his arm. The wound was almost entirely healed less than 24 hours after he received it, but the memory of the pain resurges like it has been recorded in his scar tissue. Thoughtlessly, he brings a hand up and presses a thumb into the knotted indent in his skin through his shirt. Just a week ago, Izuku was shot. He was shot, and Tomura

threatened to go on a rampage for him, and his father pet his hair and told him he was safe.

“I’m fine,” Izuku says, digging his thumb into the scar until the memory ache is replaced by a real one. “It d-doesn’t h-hu-hurt, anymmore.” Izuku is so tired of crying, which only makes his sob all the more bitter when it bubbles out. Eraserhead reels for a moment at the sudden decline in Izuku’s mood, blinking cluelessly while Izuku scrubs at his eyes and tries to regulate his breathing before he starts hyperventilating.

“Damn it. Zashi!”

“Hey there, Greenbean,” Present Mic says, crouching in front of Izuku in two seconds flat.

Present Mic reaches out slowly, clearly projecting his movements, not backing away this time, even when Izuku huddles further into the corner of the couch. Without consciously intending to, Izuku has tangled one of his hands into his hair, tugging painfully at a fistful of his curls. Present Mic pulls Izuku’s hand away from the scar in his shoulder and gently untangles the hand in his hair.

“You’re alright,” he soothes, holding both of Izuku’s hands in firm, grounding grips. He must have taken his gloves off when he started making dinner, because his skin is warm against Izuku’s – no, it’s hot, searing, painfully melting the layer of permafrost that lives just under Izuku’s skin. “Everything’s going to be okay, you’re safe here.”

Phantom whispers curl through Izuku’s ears like smoke. They stain the insides of his skull black, leave ash against his brain, a blanket of death and decay over every thought. *You’re safe here. You can rest now.*

“Come on,” Present Mic says once Izuku’s hands stop twitching in his hold. “Let’s get you to your room, yeah? You could probably use some rest, it’s been a long–” he hesitates, soft smile flickering slightly, “–well, it’s been a long week, hasn’t it? You can eat later if you feel up to it.”

Present Mic’s knees pop as he stands from his crouched position, tugging lightly at Izuku’s arms until he stands as well. Eraserhead stands with them but does not follow, his dark figure looming in the living room, still and uncanny, as Present Mic leads Izuku back to the bedroom that is apparently his now.

Present Mic walks Izuku all the way to the bed. “Sorry there’s still

confetti everywhere. I think I got most of it off the bed but vacuuming the rest up will have to wait. Just… don't pay too much attention to it, yeah?"

Izuku nods numbly, crawling into the bed and curling up on top of the covers. Izuku balls himself up on blankets that smell of foreign laundry detergent and tries not to think too hard about things like what he has done, or when Tomura will come to kill him, or whether his father is watching from same place beyond and jeering at him.

Present Mic hums behind him. "Alright. Well. I guess I'll give you some privacy. Just don't close the door, okay? If you need anything, you can always shout."

Quiet falls over the room, and the demons in Izuku's head creep out of the cracks between his thoughts, thriving in the silence the way shadows thrive in the dark. Izuku presses his hands tight to his chest, feels his heart thudding beneath his palms. He reminds himself that he is alive. He is uncertain if that is a good thing.

Izuku is a haunted person. His body is a vessel for shades and sin. A living monument for death, and who keeps something like that alive?

Present Mic speaks again from the doorway, and the monsters scatter at the sound of his voice, like cockroaches fleeing the light. "How about that hug, huh?"

Izuku doesn't let himself think about it. If he thinks, he'll say no, because that's the right thing to say. But if he says no, Present Mic will leave and Izuku will all alone with the ghosts, and they will push at the cracks of him until he falls to pieces. If he thinks, he'll say no, but he wants to say yes – wants to say it so very, very badly, even if it is the wrong thing to say. He is so cold, and his skin doesn't feel like his own, and he is starving for something he is not supposed to have but doesn't know how to live without, and the only time he has stopped feeling like he is about to turn to dust when Present Mic held his hands.

Izuku rolls halfway over, stretching out an arm towards the door without thinking or looking. If he thinks, he'll say no, and if he looks, he'll have to think. He reaches out, and unseen, unthought of, Present Mic reaches back, grabbing Izuku by the elbow and pulling him into his arms.

Izuku has been so cold for so long that it hurts to thaw. Life stings when frozen blood finally creeps back into nearly-dead tissue.

Sometimes he feels like he should be covered in the bitter reds and necrotic blacks of frostbite. He'll look at himself and think that it's a miracle he has all of his fingers and toes when he has been freezing for years. Maybe he has lost other bits of himself, instead.

But Present Mic is warm. He is warm and he smells like leather and some kind of citrusy hair product, and he holds Izuku just tightly enough that he can feel the solid resistance of his own bones, just tightly enough to keep Izuku's soul from trying to slip out of his skin.

And Present Mic doesn't pull away, he just keeps holding Izuku perfectly tight, even when Izuku starts crying again, even when Izuku can't cry anymore and just breathes long, shuddering breaths. Present Mic doesn't pull away, even when Izuku's eyelids start to flutter, and his fingers go slack and fall limp.

Izuku falls asleep with a heartbeat in his ears, loud enough to drown out the screams of the ghosts that usually follow him into unconsciousness. He sleeps and he hears, *you're safe here, you can rest now*, and this time it sounds like a blessing in more ways than one.

Chapter End Notes

More memes:
Mischief: X X X X X X X
Roman: X
Surya: X
Zombs: X

Izuku: I need to go to jail
Aizawa: You need to go to THERAPY

Yamada, looking at Izuku's journals: Is this me?
Izuku: Oh, yeah. It's just a simple analysis of your strength and weaknesses, ways to defeat you, stuff like that. I even drew your costume and gear.
Yamada, tearing up: This is going on the fridge as soon as we get home

(cut scene, rip)
Aizawa: Bastard. Bastard, look at me.
Bastard: *bites*
Aizawa: This is important you little heathen. Listen. You WILL be nice to this child
Bastard: *shrieks*
(later, after Bastard bites Izuku)

Aizawa: Damn it, Bastard, we TALKED about this!

Next chapter: High Spec (Part I?)
Update: Jan 28 OR Feb 4
I have a lot of work to do on my manuscript, so I might skip next week, but at least Izuku finally got his hug, right?

High Spec

Chapter Notes

> This is the Montage Chapter, which means it's long (11k!), all over the place (15 scenes!), and actually has hardly any Nedzu in it, despite being named after him (sorry Nedzu, RIP). I didn't want to split it up because a) montage! and b) the sports festival is next! so you're getting A LOT all at once.
>
> Memes! From the Discord!
> Alttu: X
> Cloud: X X X X X X X X
> Egg: X X X
> Finch: X X X X X X X
> Hound: X
> Nellie: X X X
> Oscine: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is how the end begins:

Tomura stands in the doorway of Izuku's room. The bed is made far too neatly, smooth covers with perfectly tucked corners, as if Izuku cared about those things when he normally just roughly pulled the blankets up and called that good enough. It looks more like Kurogiri's work than Izuku's, but Tomura knows that Kurogiri has not been in here since – since.

Crossing from the doorway into the room is too easy. It feels like a barrier should pop up to stop him, like he should face some kind of resistance, something more solid than stagnant air. He sits on the bed, throwing himself down and squirming slightly to muss up the too-perfect blankets. To make it look like someone lives here – because someone does, someone did.

Tomura pulls Izuku's phone out of his pocket. There is no lock on it. There's not much of anything at all on it.

Three numbers – Sensei's, Kurogiri's, and Tomura's own.

A few puzzle games.

A news app.

Less than a dozen photos.

Only one of them is of Izuku. That's the one Tomura stares at. He zooms in past his own face, scrunched up and unimpressed, until Izuku fills the screen, beaming and enthusiastic. He looks happy, Tomura thinks. Tomura had thought he was happy. Maybe not all the time, but in general, certainly. Happy with Tomura. They had been happy, hadn't they?

"Ah," Kurogiri's voice breaks the silence, "I was wondering where his phone went." His voice is carefully neutral, smooth and slippery enough that Tomura can't get a grip on what he's thinking.

"He'll want it when he comes back."

"Shigaraki Tomura. He is not coming back." Kurogiri says nothing more, standing in the doorway like there is a barrier there, like there is no going back if he crosses it.

Maybe he's right. Maybe there's no going back. Tomura stares at Izuku's face and wonders if anything he thought he knew is true. Not happy, not here, not coming back.

Tomura's middle finger, suspended, shaking, eats away at the device the moment it makes contact. Within seconds, the screen in his hands glitches into a distorted mosaic of red, green, and blue, then flickers into black.

This is how the end begins – not with a bang, but with the soft whisper of dust floating onto the bed of an unlived-in room.

Izuku doesn't look anything like himself.

Maybe that's a good thing. A chance to remake himself, starting right here with the UA uniform.

Or maybe he is just a child playing dress up.

A week ago, Tomura had entered the bar in this same uniform and Izuku had mocked him for it. If Tomura could see him now, he would return the favor. He would take one look at Izuku and immediately tear into the poor attempt Izuku made at tying his tie, as if Tomura

hadn't needed to look up how to do his own. Izuku can imagine it so vividly he is almost surprised that Tomura isn't lounging on the bed when he turns away from the mirror.

Lucy is there instead, splayed out in the warm spot that Izuku just recently left. He can see bright bits of blue confetti caught up in the fluff of Lucy's belly and grimaces. Izuku knows relatively little about Midnight's civilian personality, but apparently her sense of humor aligns with her hero theming, since the confetti she had covered Izuku's new room in is penis shaped. Present Mic – just Mic, Izuku reminds himself – had vacuumed the confetti up the morning after Izuku arrived, but it is still popping up everywhere, even outside of the bedroom. Lucy startles slightly when Izuku crosses the room and reaches out to start combing the offending debris away but doesn't otherwise protest. Lucy is the easiest of the cats, Izuku has already realized – a big ball of fluff, lazy and sweet, like the clouds he is named for. As apprehensive as Izuku still is about Bastard, if most cats are actually like Lucy, he can understand why people like them so much.

Izuku scoops the fluffball up, cradling him in his arms like a baby, and Lucy makes an appropriately pathetic and high-pitched chirp in response, blue eyes round and guileless. An abundance of long white fur is immediately deposited along the front of Izuku's slate grey jacket. He'll probably never be able to get all the fur out after handling Lucy like this, but maybe that will help the clothes to feel less like a costume he will never fit into and more like *his*. Less like fantasy and more like reality.

He carries Lucy out into the living room, hovering near the mouth of the hallway as he watches Mic dance around the kitchen while Eraser sits on a stool with his forehead resting against the counter. Mic exclaims when he sees Izuku, and somewhere unseen in the kitchen, likely bouncing along with Mic's movements, Disco meows.

"Look at you! You're rocking that uniform, kiddo!"

Eraser lifts his head, glaring blearily over to Izuku. "What did you do to your tie?" he asks, frankly.

Izuku hesitates. "Tied it?"

"I swear, if my arms weren't in casts–"

"Come on, Sho, I think he looks great! Very fashionable." Mic spares Izuku an over-dramatic wink while Eraser grumbles to himself.

Izuku takes his own seat at the counter, dropping Lucy in his lap as he sits. Hands free, he immediately fiddles with his tie, wondering if he has any hope of fixing it on his own. From his stool, he can see Disco enthusiastically twisting and twining through Mic's ankles. He wonders where Bastard is for half a second before the question is answered by a dull pinch on the side of his foot. It hardly hurts, but Izuku still jumps. Lucy trills quietly as he is jostled. Bastard yowls, presses her belly to the ground, and darts off. Disco meows after her, less disjointed, but just as loud.

Eraser groans. "Shut up. It's too early for this. The both of you spawned straight from hell."

"They're not that bad," Mic defends, even as Bastard and Disco start to shout back and forth to each other.

"Says the one who can turn his hearing off. You and Lucy are lucky."

"You ready to face the day, Greenbean?" Mic asks, ignoring Eraser's grumbling.

No, Izuku thinks, staring at the dark green bands around the cuffs of his sleeves, at the glint of metal on his wrists beneath them.

"Sure," he says.

"Well?" Katsuki asks, casting a critical eye over Hobo-Sensei's small and plain office. "What do you want?"

"This is about Midoriya Izuku," Hobo-Sensei says without preamble. If there's one thing Katsuki can appreciate about the man, it's that he doesn't bother with beating around the bush. Katsuki sits up straighter, appropriately attentive.

"Have they caught him, then?"

"Not exactly. He turned himself in last week." Something cold drips down Katsuki's spine and he fights against a shudder. Hobo-Sensei watches Katsuki, eyes too keen for how tired and bloodshot they are, before continuing, "Due to his circumstances, it has been decided that the most appropriate course of action for him is a rehabilitation

program here at UA."

The cold caressing Katsuki's vertebrae freezes, crackling along his nervous system like a painful frost. A small explosion pops across his palm without thought. His quirk is a hot and alive comfort beneath his skin, exactly where it should be. Hobo-Sensei's eyes narrow in on the tick.

"I know the two of you have history–"

"No," Katsuki interrupts. "Find something else to do with him."

"I'm telling you this as a courtesy. The decision has already been made."

"Well make a new one!" Katsuki yells, standing to slam his hands against his teacher's desk. His chair skids back as he abandons it, screeching across the ground. The desk is already battered and bruised, so the scorches Katsuki adds to the mess don't really mean much, but the man still watches Katsuki's fit of temper with a deeply unimpressed air about him that only serves to make Katsuki more irate.

"Bakugou. This isn't up to you."

"Like hell it isn't! This is *my* school, and I don't fucking want him here!"

"He already is. He started today."

Words failing, Katsuki yells something incoherent, slamming his fist hard enough against the desk that everything on top of it rattles. The sparks in his hands, growing progressively larger and more aggressive, splutter and die in a fraction of a second.

"This tantrum is unbecoming, Bakugou," Hobo-Sensei says, irises shining faintly red through his bandages. Katsuki calls to his quirk, but there is only an echo where there is supposed to be an answer. He collapses backward, barely catching himself on the edge of the chair he pushed away.

"I understand you have history," the hero says, distant through the ringing in Katsuki's ears. "I'm letting you know now so you won't be caught off guard if you see him. I don't expect you to befriend him or even speak to him. But I *do* expect you to control yourself. Ignore him, if you have to."

With a blink, Katsuki's quirk is back. He stares at the orange light of combustion against his skin and closes his fist around it, like that will ensure it cannot be taken from him. Like if he can only hold on tightly enough, no one will ever be able to snatch it away.

"Look, kid," Hobo-Sensei sighs, "I understand where you're coming from. But Midoriya isn't the problem." No, of course not. Because Deku is *never* the problem. No, Deku is always helpless and innocent and *Katsuki* is the problem. Katsuki is the one who gets fucked over and needs to apologize for it while Deku plays victim. "If you ever want to talk about it," Sensei continues, "I can make you an appointment with Hound Dog."

Talk about it? And say what? That Deku was a fucking thief who stole quirks? *And how does that make you feel?* Helpless. Weak. Scared. Fucking pissed, that's how. Katsuki doesn't need any kind of doctor to poke around his head and tell him how he's supposed to feel, thanks. Katsuki has it all under control.

Hitoshi pulls at his lower eyelid. Scrunches up his nose. Sticks his tongue out. He presses a hand to his hair, making it lay flat against his head, but that just makes his forehead look too big. His hair springs back up as soon as he stops restraining it, anyway. The amount of gel it would take to hold it down would make his look just as stupid as he does leaving it loose.

"You're anxious about something," his father says, leaning against the bathroom door with a mug cupped between his hands. Hitoshi side-eyes him, leaning away from the mirror, as if he hadn't been inspecting his reflection for the better part of the last five minutes.

"What gave you that idea?"

"You only preen when you're anxious."

"Gee, thanks for the helpful psychoanalysis, Dad," Hitoshi says dryly, resisting the urge to start futzing with his hair again.

"Hey, you asked," his father replies as Hitoshi pushes past him. "That's not even psychoanalysis, really. More just basic observation."

“Sure, whatever you say, Dr. Dad. Is there still coffee in the pot?”

“What, am I not allowed to know things about my own son, now?”

“Coffee?”

His father sighs. “Of course there’s still coffee. *But* – you can only have some if you tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Resorting to bribery now, are you?” Hitoshi asks, grabbing a mug as his father speeds ahead of him to snatch the coffee pot up and hold it out of reach.

A shrug. “If it works.”

“The sports festival is next week,” Hitoshi answers, words clipped, holding his mug out expectantly. His father measures the response for a moment before filling the mug halfway. Hitoshi eyes the deficit, unimpressed. “How do I get the rest?”

“Tell me *why* the sports festival is bothering you.”

“It’s the biggest televised sporting event in the nation. Forgive me for being nervous about that.” Hitoshi injects as much sarcasm as he can into his voice and tries to avoid fidgeting too obviously, even as he wants to squirm beneath his father’s assessing gaze, a more vibrant purple than Hitoshi’s own lavender.

“If it’s just stage fright, you have nothing to worry about. No one will be watching you.”

The muscle of Hitoshi’s jaw ticks as he clenches his teeth. His father notices, of course, targeting the small spasm like a hawk fixated on its prey. Why not take notes, while he’s at it? Like Hitoshi is just another patient for his father to pick apart and diagnose all the ways he’s fucked in the head. He swallows the thoughts before he can voice them, bitter against the back of his tongue.

“Oh, they’ll be watching me,” he says instead, tilting his chin up defiantly. “I’m going to win.”

His father sighs again, but fills Hitoshi’s mug the rest of the way, nodding to the table. Hitoshi hesitates a moment before sitting, steeling his face as blank as he can manage, projecting indifferent exhaustion.

“You still want to transfer?”

“Yes,” Hitoshi bites out, frustrated that the question even needs asking.

Heroics is all Hitoshi has *ever* wanted. Sure, he failed the entrance exam. Crashed and burned, actually, like a graceless disaster. But what else was he supposed to do, with the deck stacked against him? Give up, he supposes. At least, if you asked his father, anyway. Write it off as a failure – *too bad, so sad* – move on to be a therapist or some other perfectly respectable profession. Let a dream of a decade die in two weeks.

But oh, Hitoshi forgot – he doesn’t have *dreams*. No, he has *spite* and a *contrary disposition*. Well, maybe his father is right. Maybe Hitoshi is spiteful; maybe he’s contrary. But he’s going to show the world just how far those things can take him.

Izuku does not slot naturally into the household. Sometimes movies and television will act like family is this destined thing, like groups of people just fit together, without effort or growing pains. Shouta thinks it stands acknowledging that there is nothing easy or natural about making a family – if that really is what they are making, here. This is neither a good thing nor a bad thing; it simply is.

The fact of the matter is that Shouta and Hizashi have been living together for over a decade, and now there is a third body in their space. A third person, with thoughts and feelings, wants and needs, completely separate from their insular rhythm of two. Sometimes Shouta will try to flop down on the couch, and he will have to stop himself before he body slams a traumatized teenager who is still incredibly wary of physical contact. Sometimes Hizashi will take out his hearing aids only to put them right back in again because the kid doesn’t know any sign language, yet.

No, there is nothing natural about it. Sometimes it is a bit cramped to squeeze Izuku in, sometimes their edges grind together uncomfortably as they learn to fit around each other. It is new and it is odd. But Shouta can’t say he minds.

Izuku, sitting on the couch, shoots Shouta a look where he sprawls in

the armchair. The kid has been darting him looks since they got home, glancing back and forth between Shouta and Bastard, who has been stalking him since they walked through the door, creeping along, closer and closer until she can lunge out and nip him. He looks at Bastard, sitting on the other side of the couch and staring at him intently, and then back to Shouta. The kid's eyes are nervous no matter where he's looking, like Shouta is just as likely to bite him as Bastard is.

Bastard keeps her eyes on Izuku, her stunted half-tail swaying like a metronome behind her. Izuku watches her back, out of the corner of his eye, hands tucked into his sleeves and then cradled between his knees where she can't get to them. As apprehensively as he stares at her, the kid handles her attention with good grace.

"It means she likes you," Shouta tells him. Bastard slinks an inch closer to the kid while his attention shifts to Shouta.

"I know," he says, soft and wary. "She's never h-hurt me, it's just…"

"Startling?" Shouta offers. The kid nods. "Consider it training."

"T-training?"

"You want to be a hero, right? Well, it pays to not startle easy."

Bastard pounces, going for Izuku's hands and then rolling around in his lap when she can only get his sleeves. She rights herself and then launches away. Izuku winces as her claws dig into his legs on takeoff. Shouta chuckles under his breath, less a laugh and more a half-huff of air. It earns him a thin smile in response, cautious and uncertain, but neither forced nor fake, which is the best they've gotten out the kid so far.

"What are you thinking?" Shouta asks when the kid goes back to shooting him nervous looks.

Obviously, Izuku has *something* to say, squirming and side eyeing Shouta the way he has been all day. But Shouta and Hizashi learned quickly that the kid wouldn't say *anything* without prompting. Hizashi would probably think of a gentler way to ask, to coax it out of the kid without making him jump the way Shouta just did, but short and to the point is really the only way Shouta knows how to handle things.

"I could heal you," the kid blurts in response after an expectant moment of silence. Immediately, he flushes and shakes his head,

stuttering, “I-I know I’m not – I’m not m-meant to use my q-quirks out-outside of t-training, but I – I have a he-healing one, and Recovery G-girl, she – she hasn’t b-been able t-to heal you y-yet, and, and it’s my f-fault, so–”

“It’s not your fault,” Shouta interrupts, putting a quick end to the rambling. Izuku ducks his head, face a bright red that makes his freckles look odd against his skin. “Recovery Girl is healing me, it’s just a process.”

“I could h-help, though,” Izuku says, softly.

Shouta knows exactly what the kid is offering. Shuzenji’s quirk utilizes the patient’s stamina to accelerate the healing process, which is a limited resource for someone as perpetually exhausted and sleep deprived as Shouta. But somewhere on the ridiculously long manifest of quirks Izuku has collected is a healing quirk that uses the *owner’s* energy. A quirk like that would be able to take care of Shouta’s injuries no problem, but *Izuku* would be the one to pay for it.

“Not your job, kid. We’re the ones taking care of you, alright? You don’t have to worry about us.” As an afterthought, Shouta adds, “Thank you.”

This is the first lesson Izuku needs to learn – you are not expendable; you are no less important than anyone else. Based on the misplaced disappointment dimming the kid’s eyes, it will be a lesson long in the making. Thankfully, Shouta has plenty of experience shoving hard lessons through thick skulls.

“Perhaps we should find a new place to stay for a time,” Kurogiri says blandly as the police on the other side of the monitor overturn the entire warehouse searching for a speck of evidence.

“No,” Tomura argues, nails digging into his neck. “They won’t find anything.”

“Of course not.” Kurogiri sounds vaguely affronted by the implication that his cleaning of the warehouse would have been in any way subpar. “But they shouldn’t have known where to look in the first place.”

“It’s one warehouse, with nothing in it. Everything sensitive was cleared out. We’re fine.”

“Shigaraki Tomura. We’re *compromised*.”

Tomura scrubs his nails against his shirt to clear away the clotted blood that has caught beneath them. Kurogiri is right, as much as Tomura hates to admit it. If the police have the location of the warehouse, they have to assume that they have the location of the bar, as well. Tomura knows this, but the sting in his neck does nothing to distract from the gnawing ache in his chest. He imagines Sensei sitting at the bar, imagines Izuku sitting next to him. Imagines all four of them eating dinner together while Izuku tries to restrain his excitement over some fight he saw on the news. He imagines it, and it fucking *hurts* in a way that Tomura can’t stand.

Where did it go wrong? How had they gone from that to *this*? This – where Sensei is dead, and brothers have become enemies, and homes have been compromised. Where’s the divergence point? What butterfly effect rippled out and led Tomura to this bad ending? What decision did he make that led to the world sitting up and saying, “we will remember that;” what did he fucking *do?*

He should have killed Izuku when he had the chance. There are still scars on the floor of the bar from the first time that brat stole Decay, still scars around Tomura’s wrist, carved into him like a shackle to his own goddamned mistakes. Tomura should have struck the brat down the moment he recognized him as a threat. Instead, he let himself be fooled, complacent and content, telling himself that they were *brothers*.

Cain and fucking Abel, maybe.

There’s only one way the story ends.

“Young Midoriya, there you are.”

Izuku blinks at the scraggly blonde man who just stuck his head into the infirmary. All Might, Izuku recalls after a moment. Somehow, this man was meant to be All Might. It had seemed absurd when Izuku first figured it out – a kneejerk assumption from an offhand comment

that couldn't possibly be correct, a misunderstanding made when Izuku hadn't been thinking clearly. But any doubt on the matter had been eradicated when Tsukauchi had solemnly impressed the need for secrecy and discretion on Izuku.

Looking closely, Izuku can see the resemblance. All Might's bulk and boom is such a seemingly inherent part of him that it is hard to separate him from it, but this man, as thin and sickly as he is, has the same intense look about his deeply set eyes.

"Yagi," Eraser says from the bed Recovery Girl herded him to. His voice is flat and dry, like always, but after nearly a week living with the heroes, Izuku can tell that his voice is slightly *more* flat and dry than its default state.

All Might – Izuku tucks the name *Yagi* away in the back of his head – spares Eraser a strained smile before looking back to Izuku. "I was hoping to speak with you, my boy."

"Well, you've found him. Speak."

"Ah – in private?"

"No." Eraser delivers his rejection without bothering to look at All Might, who deflates in the doorway and hovers there, rebuffed but unwilling to leave. He casts small, beseeching glances in Izuku's direction, as if Izuku is supposed to somehow rectify the situation.

"Well, it's really quite important," All Might insists, though weakly, drawing back slightly so his chin only just crosses through the infirmary doors. Eraser shoots him a deeply unimpressed look, but Mic intercepts the glare, rising from his seat on the side of the bed to stand between them with his hands raised in passive mediation.

"How about this! I'll go along with Izuku and Yagi to discuss whatever it is that needs discussing while you and Shuzenji finish up. Sound good?" All Might sags with relief, a grateful smile splitting his face. Eraser doesn't protest, which is as good as agreement, coming from him. Mic claps. "Compromise! It's great!"

Mic shuffles Izuku and All Might out of the infirmary to the teacher lounge. The couch isn't the best place to have a serious conversation, but it is the most comfortable place in the room, so when Mic takes a seat there, Izuku follows his lead. All Might eyes the couch for a moment before pulling a chair away from the table and setting it across from them.

“So, what’s this about?” Mic asks, genial but with a slight edge that Izuku hesitantly labels *protective*. All Might sets his mouth in a grim line that makes the shadows around his eyes seem darker. He nails Izuku in place with his gaze, and in that moment the resemblance between this wraith of a man and the Symbol of Peace is more tangible than ever. He has the look of a man who has been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for years.

“Does the name Shimura mean anything to you?” All Might asks after a long moment of staring Izuku down.

Izuku hesitates, frowning. “S-should it?”

“All for One never mentioned anything about a Shimura Nana? Or a Shimura Tenko, perhaps?”

“No,” Izuku replies, honest. “He doe– d-didn’t tell me m-much.” Izuku jumps slightly when Mic places a hand on his shoulder, but he leans into the slight touch before the hero pulls away, letting the warmth of it sink through his jacket with only a small measure of guilt.

“Who are they?” Mic asks when All Might provides no immediate elaboration.

“Shimura Nana was my… mentor. And Shimura Tenko is her grandson, though he apparently went missing after the deaths of his family when he was only a child.”

Izuku’s eyes widen. He sits forward, unconsciously pulling away from Mic’s touch as he leans closer to All Might. Several things click into place at once, the least of which being why All Might wanted to speak to him to begin with.

“Tomura,” he breathes, half question and half epiphany.

It is a bit of a leap, perhaps, but to Izuku, many mysteries have just been solved at once. Questions that he has been asking for the last five years suddenly have answers. Who Tomura is, where he came from, why Izuku’s father took him in.

“Yes,” All Might confirms.

“The hand. I – I told Tsukauchi, it belonged to his biological father–”

“Shimura Kotaro.”

Izuku tries to stop his bottom lip from wobbling as he meets All Might's eyes. The man returns his gaze, serious and composed. Izuku wonders how much of Tomura's life can be attributed to All Might. All for One had had Tomura on puppet strings, pulling him around every which way, and Izuku had hated to see it. How many of those strings had been attached because of the old grudge between All for One and All Might? Who would Tomura have been allowed to be if All Might's shadow had never been cast over his life?

"So what?" Izuku asks. His voice is slightly too cold, a tone that makes Mic look at him carefully and replace his hand on Izuku's shoulder, squeezing gently. All Might tilts his head slightly, a fraction of a degree. "So Tomura is – what? Related to someone you used to know? And my father took him to get to you, there's no doubt about that. I might not have known the connection, but I know my father, and that's exactly the kind of thing he'd do. So what? What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to help him, of course," All Might answers. "Nana wouldn't want this for him."

Izuku sits back, tension and defiant energy leaving him all at once. He turns the name Shimura Tenko over in his head, rolls it silently around his tongue. It's empty, meaningless. But it has sparked a determined fire in All Might's eyes.

What makes someone worth caring about? Why is Shimura Tenko any more worth helping than Shigaraki Tomura? Why is Izuku's brother a villain, while Shimura Nana's grandson is a victim? When does someone become a tragedy instead of another faceless statistic?

Izuku doesn't know. It is frustrating to him, that anyone should be lost to these fickle affections, that something as empty as a name should make the difference in whether or not someone deserves help when they need it. For now, though, he buries the frustration beneath relief. Because right here and right now, All Might's reasons don't matter.

Tomura does.

Katsuki is not a jumpy person. He doesn't startle easily because he's *aware* of his surroundings. Situational awareness is an important skill

for a hero, after all. He can't just go around letting any shitty extras get the jump on him – and they never do, because he's observant and attentive the way any hero who lives to move up the ranks needs to be.

The point is, if Deku was around, Katsuki would *notice*. So there's no fucking point in glancing over his shoulder or doing a double take whenever he so much as sees the color green. It's a goddamned *bush*, that's all, and Katsuki is perfectly aware of that, thank you very much.

And maybe Deku came out of nowhere at the USJ, but that wouldn't happen again. Katsuki just hadn't expected to see him there – and he had no *reason* to, considering the thief was supposed to be in the US, far, far away from Katsuki. He just didn't notice Izuku because there was no way Izuku was supposed to be there, he was supposed to be *anywhere* but there. Now, Katsuki knows what to expect, so Deku won't be catching him by surprise again. Katsuki is better than that.

"Bakugou–"

Katsuki spins, one hand flying to the pin on his newly reconstructed gauntlet as he splays his other palm out. Frog Face blinks at him, slow and deliberate, not flinching back even when his palm sparks a little too close to her skin.

"What do you fucking want?" he bites out, trying to draw his fingers away from the pin without calling attention to the fact that they had reflexively grabbed it to begin with.

"We've been partnered together," she tells him, pointing to the other extras who are branching off in pairs for the exercise.

"I fucking knew that." He wonders when the pairings were announced, wonders how he missed All Might calling his name. Probably Shitty Hair or Racoon Eyes was making some kind of racket and drowned it out. They've latched onto Katsuki, despite his protests, and it seems like one or the other is always yelling about something, and Katsuki can't hear over that shit.

Frog Face moves past him, leading the way to whatever corner she's apparently decided they're going to discuss strategy in. Katsuki doesn't tense as she passes through his peripheral vision, doesn't follow the green blur of her until his eyes ache from trying to practically go back into his head. That would be – that would be fucking stupid, is what it would be.

Hitoshi tends to get to school early. It's a rare occasion that he actually manages to be asleep when his alarm is meant to go off, so he finds himself with an abundance of early waking hours. Largely, this time is devoted to drinking enough coffee to make up for the fact that he shouldn't be awake at all, but at some point, he has to either leave early or put up with his father's attempts at conversation, and Hitoshi almost always choses the former.

So, he gets to school early. Not *obscenely* so – he's not usually the first one there, or anything – but early enough that he can rest his head on his desk and pretend to sleep while the classroom fills around him.

Today, he is walking with his earbuds jammed in and his head down and he doesn't even notice anyone else in the hallway until a solid few seconds after they crash into him, right outside the doors of class 1-C.

"Shit," he says, blinking at the other boy, who he just knocked right off his feet. Hitoshi yanks at the wire of his earbuds, ripping them from his ears a little too roughly. The chord jerks and dances around as he shoves them into his pocket. They'll be tangled to hell later, but whatever; picking the knots apart will just give him something to do.

The boy sits on the ground, blinking up with equal surprise. His eyes are big – really big, maybe a bit *too* big, even – with bruises underneath, deep and dark enough to rival Hitoshi's own. There's a notebook, laying open and face down about a foot away, presumably knocked straight out of the guy's hands when they collided. Hitoshi scrubs a hand across the back of his neck, scowling at the hot feeling of a blush there, as he crouches down to pick the book up. Some of the pages have crinkled and bent during their messy landing, and Hitoshi does his best to smooth one of them out.

The red, spiky-haired kid from class 1-A stares back at him. A drawing of him, anyway. A pretty good one, at that. Not perfect, but detailed and accurate enough that Hitoshi can clock the dude on sight. The drawing is labeled, "KIRISHIMA EIJIRO." Beneath that, "Quirk: Hardening." There is more writing from there – the entire two-page spread is filled with small, cramped scribblings, interspersed with an occasional illustration. Hitoshi brings the page closer to his face, squinting as he tries to make sense of it, but can only pick out a few scattered words before the book is unceremoniously snatched from his

hands.

The boy stands – and shit, Hitoshi meant to offer to help him up or something, he must look like such an asshole – and clutches the journal to his chest, eyes looking bigger than ever for how wide they have gone.

"I – s-sorry!" His voice is higher pitched than Hitoshi would have guessed. Maybe he's nervous. Or maybe he's afraid. Hitoshi has never seen the kid before in his life, but he's wearing a uniform and he came out of 1-C, so it's possible he knows some of Hitoshi's classmates. And it's possible that they told this kid all about Hitoshi. And his quirk. Of course he's fucking nervous, then. They always are.

The boy is gone in an instant, before Hitoshi can say anything. Which is probably for the best, since he knows himself well enough to admit that whatever came out of his mouth probably would have been nasty. He gives himself a moment to sneer at the ground before shaking it off, coaching his face back into tired blankness as he shoves the classroom door to the side. Yamada-Sensei, feet kicked up on his desk, waves in greeting. Hitoshi ignores him just as resolutely as he ignores his two classmates chatting in the back of the room, stalks to his desk, pillows his heads on his arms, and promptly pretends to sleep.

The problem child isn't sleeping. He pretends to. He goes into his room and turns the lights off and doesn't come out until morning. But every day the shadows under his eyes get just a bit darker. Every day, he looks a bit more haggard, even as he shows other signs of improvement – even as he offers small, hesitant smiles, as he flinches less and less from touch. He's either not sleeping or he's sleeping poorly.

Shouta hopes it's the first. He hopes the kid lays awake at night. As awful as it is, he'd rather the kid be unable to sleep than to have his rest robbed from him by nightmares. Shouta hates the thought of the kid, the *child*, waking in a cold sweat and crying to himself, alone in a dark room with Shouta and Hizashi just down the hall. Shouta wants to think Izuku would come to them, if he needed someone, but it is an irrefutable fact that Izuku would *not*. Not yet.

It's only been a week, Shouta reminds himself. Izuku's recovery is

going to take years – and that's if they're being optimistic, which certainly isn't a trait anyone would normally ascribe to Shouta. More realistically, Izuku might never fully recover. Shouta will do just about anything to ensure that the kid finds happiness again – that's a commitment he made when they took Izuku in, and Shouta takes his commitments very seriously – but total recovery isn't necessarily a prerequisite to happiness.

Because loss isn't always something you can just *get over*. Loss is a wound. In the beginning, it is a bleeding, raw thing. You wonder if it will kill you. Sometimes, it does. Other times, it gets better. You heal. Not always all at once – because sometimes stitches pop and skin tears and the process starts all over again – but you heal.

Here's the thing, though – healing is entirely different to never having been hurt at all. You're not good as new. Lost limbs don't grow back. You end up with scar tissue and phantom pains, and sometimes you can spend your entire life hurting from an old wound, long after the bleeding has stopped.

Shouta lays sleepless in bed next to a softly snoring Hizashi, aching inside and out. His arms and head, still in recovery; the knee he busted back in his early twenties, long since healed but still protesting regularly; the middle of his back, just because age is catching up to him a little faster than it probably should be. His lungs, his heart, because there is a kid down the hallway – a kid Shouta is meant to be responsible for – who is probably suffering instead of sleeping.

Hizashi sleeps like the dead, so Shouta doesn't bother with caution as he sits up in bed, stretching his bad knee a few times before trying to put his weight on it. Disco, curled up against Hizashi's spine, pops his head up curiously. He hops over Hizashi, unrepentantly digging his back paws into his kidney as he goes. Hizashi mumbles something and roll onto his stomach. Disco meows.

"It's nearly 3AM," Shouta replies. "Show some respect."

Disco meows again, disrespectfully. He follows Shouta when he leaves the bedroom, trailing too close to his ankles and nearly tripping him at every step. Down the hall, Izuku's door is still open a crack. If he feels that the "no closed doors" policy is a violation of his privacy, he has never complained. He has never complained about anything at all, actually. Shouta will probably mark the day he finally does down on the calendar – it'll be something worth celebrating.

Shouta leans against the wall next to the door. If he listens closely, he can hear Izuku breathing. No tears, not that Shouta can hear, anyway. It's improbable that the kid has learned to cry while keeping his breathing so even, and Shouta certainly hasn't seen any evidence that that's the case, but the possibility lodges uncomfortably in his throat when he tries to swallow.

"You awake?" he asks into the darkness. Izuku's breathing hitches, answer enough, but Shouta won't force the kid into conversation, if he wants to pretend he's sleeping.

"Yeah." Disco greets the new voice with another meow, pushing himself into the room in pursuit. There is a faint sound of rustling blankets as Izuku makes a space on the bed for the cat.

"Can I come in?"

Another pause, longer than the last. Shouta wonders if the problem child would say no even if he wanted to. Izuku says, "Yeah."

Diffuse moonlight spills through the bedroom window, just enough that Shouta can see Izuku as he sits up, careful not to disturb Lucy, who has taken to sleeping in his bed. Disco shoves his head eagerly against the boy's hands, taking the initiative to use them to pet himself when Izuku doesn't do an enthusiastic enough job of it.

"Have you slept at all?"

"…Not yet."

"That's not healthy."

"Have y-you slept?"

Shouta narrows his eyes. "I'm not healthy. Don't tell Mic I admitted that." Izuku hums mildly, noncommittal and distracted. "What's on your mind?"

Izuku is quiet for a long moment. Long enough that Shouta suspects he simply won't get an answer, and he won't push – not at three in the morning when tears seem so much closer to the surface than they do in the light of day, not when Zashi is asleep and unable to deescalate any emotional upheavals that may occur. Izuku wraps his arms around Disco and pulls the cat to his chest, ignoring the discontent squirming his hold elicits.

“What if I made the wrong choice?”

Shouta doesn’t bother asking what choice Izuku’s referring to. He crosses the room to sit on the bed.

“Sometimes,” he begins, after careful consideration, “there is no right or wrong choice. Only choices we have to live with.”

Perhaps it is not the right thing to say. It is not kind or gentle. But then again, neither is the truth.

“What if…” Izuku whispers, too soft, trails off. “What if I can’t?” It’s a question that can only be asked in darkness, with the comfort of shadows between you and whoever you are addressing. Light can scare questions like these away. Not the thoughts – never those – but the voicing of them.

“You can.” Shouta says it firmly, because he believes it. “You already are.”

Izuku hums again. Noncommittal. Distracted. Neither of them says anything more. Shouta doesn’t leave the room until predawn light starts to leak over the horizon and through the window, showing the kid slumped over, asleep in his pile of blankets.

“It’s been over a week,” Tomura says flatly.

“I’m aware,” Kurogiri replies, distracted.

Tomura’s eyebrow twitches. Being casually dismissed is nearly worse than being ignored. He glares hard at the useless warp gate that has insisted they lock themselves away in this tiny apartment that seems like it should have been condemned years ago. Kurogiri doesn’t acknowledge him, knitting away at some shapeless thing he pulled out of nowhere on their second day here. Spiteful, Tomura reaches over the gap between their seats and closes his hand around the ball of vibrant purple and red yarn Kurogiri is working from.

“I’m tired of being here,” Tomura says. It’s not just a statement of fact – it’s a threat. But Kurogiri hardly seems intimidated, sighing as he places his knitting needles in his lap. Tomura kind of wants to snatch

one of them up and see if he can use it to find Kurogiri's jugular, beneath all that mist.

"Why not go back to your games?"

"I'm in a mood for a new game. The most dangerous game."

Smoke swirls around Kurogiri's eyes as he tilts his head slightly. "That's a different kind of game. You're getting your references crossed."

Tomura squints, sneers. "Do I look like I care? What are you even talking about?"

"'The Most Dangerous Game,' a short story by–"

"Did you miss the part where *I don't care?"* Tomura growls, shaking yarn-ash away from his fingers with an agitated flick. "Why are we just sitting here when that little team killing bastard is still alive?"

"And what is it you'd rather do instead?" Kurogiri asks, in that mild, patronizing way that makes Tomura want to throttle him. Too often, Kurogiri speaks to Tomura as if he is nothing but a foolish child. He forgets that Tomura was chosen by Sensei, taught by Sensei, trained by Sensei – because Tomura is going to change the world, and Kurogiri will regret treating him this way when he does.

"I am going to *make him pay*," Tomura spits.

"And how are you planning to do that on your own?"

"I'm going to close my hands around his stupid little skull the way I should have done the moment he stumbled into the bar–"

"How many times did the two of you spar in training?" Tomura scowls at the interruption, panting. "And how many of those times did you win?"

"Shut up!" Tomura snaps. "Shut up, shut up, just shut the fuck up! He is going to get exactly what he deserves for everything he did, and *I* am going to be the one to deal it out. I already know all his dirty fucking cheat codes, and this time I am playing to *win."*

Kurogiri, uncowed by Tomura's fit of temper, hums. "Alone?"

Alone. Tomura feels the carefully enunciated word like it is being carved into his bones. Of course he is going to do it alone. Alone is

what he *is*, now. The game's not cooperative anymore; it's competitive, PvP, Tomura against his player two. It's every man for himself, a battle royale with no teams to betray you.

"Did you forget your Sensei's final lesson, Shigaraki Tomura?" Kurogiri asks. "No one can do everything on their own."

"Gather a team," Tomura recalls. All at once, his anger dulls to nothing but a hum in the back of his head as consideration shoves its way to the forefront of his thoughts.

"Precisely. The tasks before you have not changed. Gather your people, lead them, kill the Symbol of Peace, change the world. And through the course of that, Shigaraki Izuku will be dealt with."

Tomura grinds his teeth, frustration surging again. "But how am I meant to do *any* of that when you won't let me *leave this place?!"*

"The sports festival is less than a week away."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Tomura demands.

"The festival always provides a unique opportunity to gather information. It will be especially valuable this year, with All Might's new employment at the school and our past encounter with the students of class 1-A. *And* this is something we can do without risking our capture."

Oh, *excellent*, just what Tomura was looking for. Still can't leave this shithole apartment – that is, apparently, too much to ask – but he'll be able to watch some hero brats run around and punch each other on national TV. Maybe that had been Izuku's idea of a good time, but it has never been Tomura's.

The sports festival is only two days away. But that's still two days of doing nothing, just fucking waiting for a task he doesn't even particularly want to do. He never cared about the festival, when Izuku made him watch it. He doubts he'll enjoy it any more, watching alone.

"Tell me, Izuku," Nedzu begins abruptly, interrupting Izuku in the middle of his math exercises, "what do you think would happen if you

took Tokoyami Fumikage's quirk?"

Izuku winces. Too often, Nedzu asks questions like this, either in the midst of their analysis conversations or out of the blue. The principal seems as fascinated with Izuku's quirk as he is by whatever Izuku has to say about the quirks of the first-year hero students, who Nedzu has assigned him full write ups on. Izuku supposes he would be curious, too, if the quirk weren't his own, but the line of inquiry is uncomfortable, nonetheless.

He is surprised it took Nedzu to ask about Tokoyami, specifically. The bird-headed boy likely has one of the most interesting quirks in the class, and it's powerful to boot, though largely underestimated by those around him. Izuku purses his lips, math forgotten as he spins his pencil idly between his fingers and contemplates the question.

"Tokoyami's quirk doesn't really make any sense," Izuku eventually admits.

Nedzu's eyes glint. "Oh?"

"As far as I can tell, Dark Shadow is legitimately sentient. It's uncommon but not unheard of for manifestation quirks like Dark Shadow to have a degree of personality, but a-as far as I know, they don't actually have *wants* or *opinions* – at least, not beyond those of their owner." Izuku clears his throat, feeling a bit foolish to be explaining this to a being who certainly already understands it better than Izuku ever will. "It's just, well… Dark Shadow isn't like that. She's completely different to Tokoyami, and it seems like their goals sometimes actively *conflict*."

"What's your theory?"

Izuku blanches. The pencil spinning between his fingers flies off to the side and he fumbles to catch it before it can get lost in some obscure corner of the office.

"I, uh, I can't sp-speculate."

"Of course you can!" And Nedzu, of course, is not going to let things alone. He never does, to the point where his curiosity and inquiry verge dangerously on sadistic.

"Well, um, I was t-thinking – what if Dark S-Shadow isn't actually a quirk? Or rather, what if she is her own person, with her own quirk. So – so she's not r-really Tokoyami's quirk, but more like his, his s-

sibling?"

"You think?" Nedzu asks, tapping a paw to his chin. "I'll admit, the possibility has occurred to me, as well, but I haven't had time to give it much consideration, with so many students under my purview."

"It's just – well, it seems a bit farfetched, doesn't it? Wouldn't someone have said something before now? A doctor, or a quirk counselor?"

"You'd be surprised how much of quirk classification is rubber stamped," Nedzu explains. "So long as a child can use their quirk without hurting themself or others, very few professionals further investigate a quirk's exact nature or function. However," Nedzu adds with a smile that makes Izuku nervous, "you are uniquely situated to solve this mystery. Your own quirk allows you to sense others, correct?" Hesitantly, Izuku nods, though Nedzu is already well aware of the answer. "If your theory is correct, then Tokoyami would have two quirks – his own and Dark Shadow's. Have you considered approaching him?"

Izuku stares down at the quirk suppressing bands around his wrists. They are removed only periodically, during his training with Eraser, and occasionally here in Nedzu's office, when the principal's curiosity requires more than a verbal answer to satisfy. No doubt Nedzu would make a special exception and remove the bands if Izuku wanted to approach Tokoyami as suggested.

"No," Izuku says after a pause that is made thick by the weight of Nedzu's stare. "I try to stay away from the students. Class 1-A, especially."

"You've spoken to Uraraka Ochako, though, haven't you?"

Izuku flushes. He wouldn't call what he did speaking, exactly. She had been on her way to Recovery Girl for anti-nausea medication when she stumbled onto him muttering to himself outside the training field where 1-A had been having their heroics lesson. As brief as the interaction had been, Izuku doubts it reflected well on him. Uraraka had been nothing but enthusiastic and kind, greeting him almost like a friend, rather than a stranger who was cagily lurking around campus and talking to himself.

"T-that doesn't count," Izuku declares, grimacing down at his math work.

“If you say so,” Nedzu allows, with all the benevolence of someone who is dropping a topic purely out of mercy. “You realize though, that you won’t be able to avoid them during the sports festival?”

There are many parts of the sports festival that Izuku has been trying to avoid thinking about. Things like how it is going to be televised and that he is going to have to use his quirk. Most of all, he has been avoiding thinking about the people who be there. People he will be expected to use his quirks on, some of whom have already had the misfortune of meeting him. Class 1-A has already been made aware of Izuku’s presence at UA – none of the details, just that one of the villains from the USJ is at the school for rehabilitation. Most of them wouldn’t recognize him, just like Uraraka hadn’t. But a handful of them would. Like the frog-quirked girl – Asui Tsuyu, Izuku now knows – who Tomura nearly killed. Or Todoroki Shouto, who nearly destroyed Tomura’s nomu with a single powerful wave of ice.

Or Katsuki.

The sports festival is only two days away. The sports festival is what’s going to make or break everything, the moment where this whole charade Izuku has been playing at will either come together or fall apart. He honestly can’t say which would relieve him more.

Katsuki swings a fist at Shitty Hair’s head. The other boy, with his limbs mostly hardened, is too slow to dodge, but he brings his arms up to block the explosion Katsuki lets loose before retaliating with a low kick that Katsuki easily jumps over.

Katsuki has to give it to the extra – he’s good for training. The spiky bastard may be exhaustingly loud, and he’s still oddly fixated on his “manliness” bullshit, but his quirk is a perfect compliment to Katsuki’s own. With his skin hardened, the guy is practically made of stone, which lets Katsuki go to town without having to worry about getting a little too into it and seriously hurting his sparring partner.

At first, Shitty Hair had been a shitty fighter as well, just throwing himself forward with wildly swinging fists, hoping that one of his blows would land with enough force to have an impact. It probably worked just fine against the mindless robots they faced for the entrance exam, but unlike nearly every other person in his class,

Katsuki actually bothered with some combat training before getting into UA.

Kirishima has gotten better, though. Not so much that he can really hold a candle to Katsuki, of course – not by a long shot – but the improvement is still noticeable. Katsuki actually gets to employ a little thought and strategy into their spars, now. Before, it was more like blasting at a wall that occasionally jumped around.

Katsuki catches Shitty Hair in the back, sending him stumbling to his hands and knees with a surprised yelp. He rolls to the side, narrowly escaping the next blast Katsuki sends his way, and holds his hands up in tired surrender. He keeps them up, fingers still jagged and solid, until Katsuki huffs, stretches his arms out, and relaxes out of his fighting stance.

“Another round to you,” Shitty Hair says, skin returning to normal as his arms flop to the ground. He smiles a wide, goofy grin.

“You didn’t stand a chance,” Katsuki replies with a click of his tongue. He offers a hand, hefting Shitty Hair to his feet when he grasps it.

“I’ll beat you one of these days, just you wait!” Shitty Hair exclaims, clutching a determined fist in front of him. His forearms are smudged with streaks and starbursts of soot. Katsuki snorts, pulling a rag out of his gym bag and tossing it over.

“As if.”

“Dude, seriously! I have big plans for the sports festival – my quirk’s not all that flashy, not like yours, so I’ve gotta make sure I stand out. You’ll see!”

“Your plans don’t mean shit, I’m gonna win the whole thing.”

“Not without a fight, you’re not!” Kirishima yells, but he is still grinning as throws an arm around Katsuki’s shoulders. “Watch out Bakubro, we’re gonna give you a run for your money! And hey – didn’t Aizawa-Sensei say that that guy from the USJ is gonna be competing, too? Deku, right? He seemed pretty manly when–” Grinding his teeth, Katsuki shoves Shitty Hair’s arm away. The spiky bastard stumbles to the side with a shout and an affronted pout.

“Deku’s not gonna get past the first fucking round,” Katsuki growls. “He’s nothing but a spineless weakling crybaby, and if he so much as *looks* in my direction, I’ll grind him to dust. There’s nothing manly–”

Katsuki sneers the word "–about him. He's a pathetic, sniveling, little villain."

"I don't know, man. That, uh, sounds a little harsh."

"It's *not*. If you have two brain cells to rub together in that thick fucking skull of yours, you'll stay away from him."

Katsuki hikes his gym bag up on his shoulder, whirling on his heels to storm for the exit of the training grounds. Shitty Hair splutters behind him, jogging to catch up, but he eventually falls behind when Katsuki resolutely ignores him.

Katsuki has seen neither hide nor hair of Deku in the week since their homeless slob of a teacher told him the fucker was in the school. Katsuki has kept his eyes out, prepared for anything, but Deku never made an appearance. Katsuki is fine with that. Deku is best left neither seen nor heard, in Katsuki's opinion, but his lack of presence also creates a certain sense of unease. Because Deku is here at UA, regardless of whether Katsuki sees him, and he *must* be fucking up to something.

The sports festival is only two days away. Deku will be there, but Katsuki refuses to let the bastard fuck this up for him. Katsuki is going to show everyone exactly what he's worth, and at the end, *he'll* be the one standing on the podium, stronger than everybody else. And there's nothing fucking *Deku*, of all people, can do to stop him.

"Hi Shinsou!" the girl behind the counter at the cat café calls as the door chimes closed behind him. "The usual?" Hitoshi nods, briefly glancing to her nametag. Sonoda Teruko. Nearly every time Hitoshi comes in, she's the one who greets him, but he always manages to forget her name between visits.

Hitoshi finds his usual booth, tucked against the wide front window of the shop, plastered with little decals of cats and coffee cups. Apricat jumps up into the seat next to him a moment later, a large ginger tabby who apparently enjoys Hitoshi's vibes, since they always end up hanging out together when Hitoshi has the time and money to stop by. Hitoshi sits sideway in the booth, bracing his back against the cool glass of the window and crossing his legs to make a little bowl for

Apricat to hop into. Skit, grey and tiny, sniffs shyly at the toe of his shoe from under the table.

A few minutes later, Sonoda interrupts the trace-like state Apricat's rumbling purr has lulled Hitoshi into. She clears her throat softly before placing Hitoshi's coffee on the table. She places a muffin on a napkin next to the drink, and Hitoshi eyes the baked good warily.

"I didn't order this," he says. Too blunt, he scolds himself internally. He sounds like a jerk, when all she did was make an honest mistake.

Sonoda blushes. "I know," she says in a rush, smoothing some fly aways from her bun back against her head. "It's just – you go to UA, right? Who am I kidding, you're literally wearing the uniform, of course you do."

"Yeah," Hitoshi hesitantly confirms. Sonoda has always been friendly, but it's not like she and Hitoshi make conversation. When he first started visiting this café last year, she made a few attempts at small talk when taking his money or delivering his drinks, but his responses were so stilted that she gave up pretty fast. "What about it?" he asks. Too short, again.

"The sports festival is coming up, right? I just thought maybe you could use some – I don't know – encouragement, or something. It's – it's an encouragement muffin. Plus ultra, and all that! You'll be competing, won't you? I'll see you on TV?"

"I guess so," Hitoshi mumbles, looking away from Sonoda's timid smile to the cat dozing contentedly in his lap. "I mean, yeah, you will."

Sonoda hesitates for a moment, rocking on her heels. "Well, uh, I have to get back to work. But I'll be rooting for you!" She lingers a half moment longer while Hitoshi resolutely stares at Apricat.

He only realizes once she's gone that he didn't even thank her for the muffin. God, that went just great, didn't it? He guesses he made *slightly* less of an ass of himself than he could have, so that's a point in his favor, at least. And she didn't seem too put off by his brusqueness.

Hell, she had even said that she's *rooting* for him.

Of course, she barely knows him. She doesn't even know his full name, not to mention his quirk. She'd probably change her tune, if she did. Most people do.

But still.

The sports festival is only two days away. And for the first time, Hitoshi has someone *rooting for him*. For so long, Hitoshi has been trying to prove everyone wrong. One person rooting for him under false pretenses doesn't really change that, but the idea of being able to prove someone, even just one person, *right* still provides a novel little thrill.

"I'll win the whole thing," Hitoshi promises Apricat. Apricat's ears twitch in his sleep.

"I want you to take my quirk," Shouta announces.

Izuku, predictably, splutters. "N-no, I c-can't do that!" He shakes his head back and forth so rapidly it's a miracle it doesn't snap right off his neck.

"Yes, you can," Shouta says, keeping his voice level to compensate for the bubbling irrationality in Izuku's words.

"I'm not supposed to t-take quirks! That's not – it's *bad!"*

"You're not supposed to *steal* quirks," Shouta corrects patiently. "This isn't stealing. It's borrowing. You *will* give it back, won't you?"

"Of course!"

"Then I don't see the problem."

Izuku sags, tucking his hands to his chest and rubbing at the spot where the suppressing bands usually lie. The faint red marks that had been developing there when Izuku first moved in with them have already faded, swiftly dealt with by Shuzenji, but Shouta makes sure to keep his eyes on the area anyway, in case the problem ever reappears.

"Why do you want me to t-take it, anyway?" Shouta shrugs, shoulders protesting at the weight of the casts that he is *still* not yet free of.

"Call it professional curiosity. I want to know what it's like."

“You already do.”

“There were confounding variables at play. Now, are we going to keep talking about it or are you going to take my quirk?” Izuku stares silently at the ground. Pointlessly, Shouta raises his eyebrows. “Izuku?”

“It’s done,” Izuku says weakly. “I don’t want to activate it. I – d-don’t make me acti-tiv-vate it, please.”

The realization that Izuku’s only experience with Erasure before now was using it to *kill his father* hits Shouta abruptly. It’s like a bucket of ice water dumped over his head, stealing the air from his lungs and leaving all his muscles locked in place. God *damn it*. Shouta knew he was going to fuck this up; it’s a miracle he lasted an entire week. He forces himself to remain calm, not wanting his own frustration with himself to wind the kid up.

“You don’t have to use it,” Shouta says, perhaps a touch too soft to fully pass for casual. “You can return it whenever you’re ready. I can barely even tell that it’s gone.”

There is, as Izuku has described, a small, formless feeling in Shouta’s chest. The vaguest sense that something *might* be off. It is nearly impressive how minor and nonurgent the feeling is, and it’s not until Izuku touches his fingertips to Shouta’s and gives the quirk back that Shouta can even say for sure he is not imagining the feeling altogether. It is like a ghost of a ghost, a dream of a dream.

“Huh,” Shouta breathes, activating Erasure to confirm – though he specifically avoids looking at Izuku while he does so. “For some reason, I still expected it to hurt.”

“It does, sometimes.”

“Oh?” Shouta asks. He is wary about pressing for details, especially when having Izuku take Erasure already started today’s training off on a misguided note.

Izuku nods. “You already know what happens. With m-mutation quirks. But my fa- All for O-One, it always h-hurt when he d-did it. They…” His voice trails into a whisper, something distant and hollow. “He would put them to sleep, so he didn’t have to listen to them crying.”

Shouta grimaces. “So your quirk is different, then. Why do you think

that is?"

Izuku blinks several times in quick succession, eyes losing some of the glaze that had fallen over them as he focuses. He makes a questioning noise.

"You're a smart kid," Shouta elaborates. "You must have some kind of theory."

"I…" Izuku bites his lip, frowning at the ground. "My q-quirk isn't just a copy of my f-father's. It's… it's a little bit like my mom's, too."

"She had a telekinesis quirk, didn't she?"

"Attraction of Small Objects." The quirk's name, wordy and self-explanatory, is said in wistful, almost reverent tone. "That's how I can t-take quirks, even from a d-distance. It's – it's *attraction.* I k-know it's still st-stealing, and it's w-wrong, but the quirks, they don't – they don't *resist,* they just c-come. My – A-All for One, he… he had to *t-tear* them out."

Shouta hums a low, understanding note. "It's gentle."

Izuku falls silents. He stares hard at Shouta, eyebrows drawn together, teeth digging too hard into his bottom lip to be healthy. Beneath the messy fringe of his hair, the shadows beneath Izuku's eyes look painful.

"What?" he asks, voice as brittle as spun sugar.

"Your quirk. It's gentle."

It is hard to describe the way Izuku looks at Shouta, in that moment. The kid's eyes are wide, glowing with tears, and they fix on Shouta as if he is speaking in tongues, saying things that Izuku simultaneously can't understand and wants desperately to believe in. It is not the starry-eyed look of a child staring at their hero. It is – it is like a prophet looking at a god, receiving divine messages beyond mortal comprehension.

Shouta can't stand it. He has to look away. He swallows painfully around the lump that has abruptly formed in his throat.

"What's it called?" he asks, deflecting, voice rough. "Your quirk."

"It, uh, d-doesn't actually have a name," Izuku answers after a pause.

When Shouta finally looks back to him, the too-heavy look has faded from his eyes. “I - I registered as Q-Quirkless, and there didn’t seem to be much of a… point to n-naming it, after that.”

“We’ll need to fix that. Think on it.”

The sports festival is only two days away. Shouta will admit to having second thoughts about Izuku’s participation, but Nedzu is set on it, and Nedzu gets what Nedzu wants. With the festival will come attention, and even if Izuku doesn’t reveal the full extent of his quirk – a precaution that they have discussed at length – he’ll need something to call it. People will be talking about him, after all. Shouta has no doubt about that. For better or worse, his problem child is going to make an impression.

Chapter End Notes

> Actually, this chapter is called High Spec because it was a pain in the ass to write and I’ve decided that finishing it in four days makes me a genius
>
> Bakugou: Hi, thanks for checking in, I’m still a piece of garbage
>
> Shinsou: *arrives 90k words late with Starbucks*
>
> Me: *writes Shinsou’s POV*
> Me: I could fit so many cats in this
>
> Kurogiri: Do you ever want to talk about your feelings, Izuku?
> Izuku: No.
> Tomura: I do!
> Kurogiri: I know, Tomura.
> Tomura: I’m angry >:(
> Kurogiri: ,,, I know, Tomura.
>
> Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part I
> Update: Feb 11
> Disclaimer that in the next few weeks/months, it is more likely that I will need to skip/delay updates, but I frankly HATED taking a week off (I like updating regularly), so I’ll still be doing my best to stick to my schedule.

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part I

Chapter Notes

> Re: update schedule! I have more stuff going on irl in the foreseeable future, so here's what that means for IGG – I may have to skip some updates. If I know beforehand, I'll make a note of it at the end of the chapter, same as I have been, but I might not always be able to. At this point in time, I should never have to skip more than one week. Updates will still always be on Friday afternoons (US EST). Occasionally, I may add a shorter chapter in favor of skipping a week altogether.
> I don't actually know how relevant this will be. It's entirely possible that I'll keep updating as normal with little to no issue, but I like to communicate stuff like this clearly, so everyone knows what's going on. My accountability to my update schedule (and my transparency about it) is the only thing that is keeping my ADHD from snatching IGG's productivity right out of my hands.
>
> Anyway, my need to monologue aside, have some Discord memes!
> Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X X
> Coffee: X X X X X
> Dev: X X X X X X
> Eggs: X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This is a mistake," Shouta announces while the door to Nedzu's office is still swinging shut behind him.

Behind the desk, Nedzu tilts his head with that damnable polite, inquisitive smile, as if he doesn't already know exactly what Shouta is talking about. The rat knows what, and he knows why. He already knows everything Shouta is going to say and everything he's going to say in return. Really, there's no point in having the conversation at all, not when Nedzu has already decided exactly how it is going to end, but here Shouta is anyway.

"You'll have to be more specific. Tea?"

"He shouldn't be competing."

“I thought you were one of his advocates?” Nedzu asks mildly, filling an unrequested cup and pushing it across the desk with a nod. “Have you changed your mind about him?”

“Of course not,” Shouta responds. He breathes carefully through his nose, refusing to allow Nedzu to work him up. “But there are better ways to go about this. Two weeks ago, the kid was drowning, and now we’re throwing him straight back into the deep end before he’s even had a chance to catch his breath.”

“The sports festival is the best way to enter him into the hero course. I was under the impression that that was what you wanted?”

Arguing in such a way that he turns his opponents against themselves is Nedzu’s specialty. Everything he says sounds so damn reasonable, always things that you already agree with, to the point where you wonder why you’re arguing to begin with. Trying to reason with the rat always makes Shouta feel like he is sixteen again, tangled in his capture weapon, pulling the knots tighter with each move he makes to free himself.

“I think he would make a good hero, someday,” Shouta says carefully. “But at this point, his confidence and self-worth are too low. He’ll be a danger to himself.”

“Hound Dog has approved his transfer.”

“Hound Dog has only been speaking with him for a week and a half.”

And he’s on your payroll, Shouta thinks, but doesn’t add.

“He’s a professional,” Nedzu dismisses with cheerful nonchalance. “He thinks joining class 1-A would improve that confidence and self-worth you’re worrying about.”

And it could. It might. But– “He deserves to be safe. At least for a little while. That’s what we’re about to take away from him.”

Nedzu’s smile doesn’t fall completely, but it softens. His eyes glint with something that almost seems sincere. “He’s not safe now, Shouta,” he says, level and serious, without any of his typical affected cheer. “Any safety we’re providing him is an illusion. This way, we at least seize control of the narrative.”

“If they don’t know he’s here–”

“They’ll find him,” Nedzu interrupts. “This way, we’ll be ready for them.”

Shouta knows the plan, of course. He knows all the systems that have been implemented to detect any hostile presences, he knows the defenses in place. They’re good. Of course they are – Nedzu is the one behind them all. But no plan is perfect, and Shouta can’t help but fixate on the gaps.

“He’s not ready,” Shouta says futilely.

“He has outstanding potential,” the rat muses. “Not just as a hero, but as a catalyst for change. I think he’ll surprise you. I think he’ll surprise us all.”

From Nedzu, among the brightest creatures alive, the sentiment means something, and Shouta is briefly taken aback by it. It’s not that he doesn’t agree – he does. Midoriya Izuku, with his terrifying quirk and miraculously unbroken spirit, has the power to make change but the temperament not to force it. A rare combination.

But catalysts don’t survive. Sure, they come out the other end intact, but that’s only after getting broken down, twisted around, and then put back together. And people are far harder to repair than molecules.

“It’s a shame I won’t be able to watch,” Nedzu sighs. “Unfortunately, my presence is expected at the third-year stage, as always. Keep your eyes on him for me. I’m sure he’ll be worth watching.”

Just like that, the conversation is over, living and dying on Nedzu’s whim, as Shouta knew it would from the very beginning. His cup of tea, untouched, sits cooling on the edge of Nedzu’s desk.

Katsuki is at the front of the pack, leading class 1-A out of tunnel and into the bright sun of the sports festival’s central stadium with zero hesitation. He walks with his shoulders back and his head held high, leveling a glare at the drone that swoops down a few feet away but not shrinking away from the camera the way too many of his classmates do. Shitty Hair, as hot on Katsuki’s heels as ever, waves at the thing with an enthusiastic grin before his attention is caught by the size and volume of the audience that surrounds them on all sides.

“Holy shit,” he breathes, eyes wide, “that’s a lot of people. And Yamada-Sensei is really talking us up, huh?” The puppy-like exuberance of his grin is replaced by something more trepidatious. “Man, I’m starting to get nervous! Aren’t you, Bakugou?”

“No,” Katsuki replies. He grins, and while he may lack the pointed teeth of the boy besides him, there is a sharp, dangerous edge to Katsuki’s smile that the other could never manage. “I’m just getting more into it.”

Over the loudspeakers, Present Mic continues announcing the classes, students filing in in clumps as he does. Katsuki stares intently at each head that passes into the glaring light of the arena, searching for Deku’s unruly green mop, but seeing nothing, even as Present Mic declares all the first years accounted for. Katsuki doesn’t dare allow himself to think that Deku simply might not be participating – that would just allow the fucker to catch him off guard, later.

“Quiet everyone!” Chains and Whips calls from the center stage, snapping her flog to gain the crowd’s attention. Or rather to direct the crowd’s attention, since god knows she already has all eyes on her, what with the fucking spectacle she makes of herself. “It’s time for our player pledge! Representing the students this year is Bakugou Katsuki, from class 1-A!”

The extras mumble to each other around Katsuki, stepping to the side to make room for him to approach the stage. He takes the stairs two at a time and snatches the mic that is offered in his direction without looking at the woman handing it to him. Glaring out at the group of students, Katsuki waits for them to fall silent, waits for all of them to be looking at him, expressions ranging from excited anticipation to unimpressed impatience.

“I pledge that I’ll be number one.” Katsuki holds the microphone too close to his mouth, his voice coming too loud and slightly distorted out of dozens, if not hundreds of speakers around the stadium. The vaguely familiar faces of class 1-A break into embarrassed groans while the rest of the crowd, students and observers alike, burst into protests and shouts.

“At least be nice stepping stones for me,” Katsuki says, the staticky projection of his voice briefly overpowering everything else. He tosses the mic back to the dominatrix caricature before jumping directly off the stage. He hears her fumble to catch it, but someone on the tech end of things manages to quickly switch the mic off before it clatters

to the ground.

“How overconfident can you get?” the Shitty Hair knock off from class B yells as Robo Nerds tries in vain to scold Katsuki.

Katsuki rolls his eyes, rubbing behind his ear as a dull ringing starts up from all the noise. A bunch of oversensitive pansies, they are, if they’re going to go around screaming and crying from a simple statement of truth. And if they have a problem with it? Well, they’re welcome to try to prove him wrong.

So, the arrogant blond is Bakugou Katsuki. Hitoshi files that little bit of information with everything else he knows about the hero student – explosion quirk, short tempered, self-obsessed, probably compensating for something. It’s not much, but it’s a pretty solid foundation on which to start building strategies on how to piss the guy off. Granted, Bakugou seems like the type to make that easy. All the better for Hitoshi.

The microphone Bakugou threw at the end of his “pledge” rolls, abandoned over the stage, rocking slightly as it comes to a halt. Midnight doesn’t lean down to pick it up, and Hitoshi can’t blame her, given the number of men in the audience who are already just about frothing at the mouth from her mere presence on the stage. Hell, some of the students aren’t behaving much better.

“Now,” Midnight says, recovering remarkably well from Bakugou’s display and the crowd’s subsequent outburst, “let’s get started right away. Our first game will be the qualifier! Every year, countless sports festival hopefuls become sports festival has-beens in this round. Let’s see if you have what it takes, shall we?” Sly and sadistic, she smiles at her captive student audience, as an electronic board drops down behind her with a heavy, mechanical thunk. The display spins, cycling through possibilities so rapidly they’re nothing but a blur. Hitoshi fights against the tension that tries to seize up his muscles.

“This year,” Midnight says slowly, playing up the drama of the moment as the audience and participants alike wait with bated breath, “it’s… this!” The clunk of the board coming to a stop perfectly overlaps with the leather snap of Midnight’s whip.

“An obstacle course,” several people around Hitoshi read out, voices echoing over each other, slightly out of sync.

“That’s right! All eleven classes will be participating in the race,” Midnight explains. “The course follows the outer circumference of this stadium – about four kilometers of obstacles for you to get through! As you know, here at UA, we pride ourselves on the freedom we give our students – which means anything goes! Just stay on the course and give it everything you’ve got!”

“Plus ultra!” Hitoshi nearly jumps at the cheer that rises up around him, well over half the students responding in unison to some intangible cue.

“That’s the spirit! Now, take your places, everyone!”

The eager energy enveloping a solid portion of the group scrambles into something frantic as they process Midnight’s words and make a mad rush for the gates, pushing and stumbling to get a position as close to the mouth of the tunnel as possible. Hitoshi hangs back from the chaos, along with a decent number of other non-hero course students.

“It’s pretty ridiculous, isn’t it?” Hitoshi asks a boy he doesn’t recognize, nearly as tall as Hitoshi himself and a bit broader about the shoulders.

The boy laughs, a touch derisively. “Yeah, I don’t–”

“Let me guess. You don’t really get what the big deal is? Good – then you won’t mind if I borrow you for a bit, right?” The boy, face slack and eyes clouded, doesn’t respond. “Stick by me,” Hitoshi orders. When he takes a step forward, the boy follows. He doesn’t struggle at all, simple and obedient and perfect for what Hitoshi needs him for.

Above the gate, there are three large green lights. The first goes black with a loud electronic hum, obnoxious but distinct. The clamor at the gates grows more heated. The second light buzzes to black. Even the students where Hitoshi is, more relaxed and low energy, begin to stir.

“Start!” Midnight calls, voice nearly lost beneath the buzz of the final light and screech of the gate. Students are shoving through the gap immediately, pouring into the tunnel in a writhing mass of elbows and knees. Some of the hang-backs rush forward as well. In front of Hitoshi, a boy is knocked to the side, wavering on his feet before regaining his balance.

“Hey dude, you alright?” Hitoshi calls. The boy looks back in surprise, smiling tentatively.

“Yeah, I’m–”

“Glad you’re good. Stay by me.”

“Okay!” Yamada-Sensei calls over the speakers. His voice seems distant over the uproar of the students caught in the tunnel, but Hitoshi listens as well as he can. “Here’s the play-by-play! What should we pay attention to in the early stages?”

Another voice crackles over the speakers, duller than Yamada’s, and harder to pick up as a result. “This part right now.”

Hitoshi watches the squirming traffic jam of bodies, nonplussed. There is a part of him, childish and needy, that wants to grab the nearest drone and demand that everyone watch *him*, pay attention to *him.* Of course, he’s hardly anything interesting to watch, right now. He has hardly moved three steps since Midnight called start. And that’s a good thing – the fewer eyes on him this early, the better.

He will have time to shine, later. They will all be watching him when he wins, and they will wonder where the hell he came from. Well, he’s been here the whole time, they just never bothered to look, and soon they’ll see just how stupid that was.

There is a sharp crackle, a crystalline splintering sound that makes the hair on Hitoshi’s arms stand on end just a moment before a massive gust of freezing air billows out of the tunnel entrance. A cold, white fog billows around, muffling the sudden exclamations from within it. It’s ice, Hitoshi realizes. The tunnel is frozen through, there is a thin layer of frost even under Hitoshi’s shoes, and he’s still a ways back from the entrance.

“Jesus christ,” someone near Hitoshi breathes.

“Insane, right?” Hitoshi asks.

“I knew the hero course was–”

“Come here.”

Hitoshi looks over the people he has gathered with a critical eye. He can’t tell any of their quirks just by looking at them. Slightly inconvenient, but not too big a loss, since he’s not entirely sure if his

quirk would let him make use of them, anyway. A test for another day, perhaps, after he actually makes it into the hero course.

“I think the three of you can probably carry me,” he decides. One of them is fairly small, but the other two are decently sized. Hitoshi himself doesn’t really weigh all that much – as tall as he may be, he’s always been a beanpole.

There is some awkward fumbling in the lifting process as Hitoshi attempts to find a stable configuration without jostling any of the boys, but eventually he manages to settle himself nonchalantly onto the platform of their arms. He comforts himself with the knowledge that all the cameras are observing the no doubt thrilling action occurring at the front of the pack.

“Mush,” he says. His transport doesn’t move. He sighs, “Walk forward. As quickly as you can without slipping or running into anyone.”

They get through the tunnel with surprising speed, picking their way steadily across the ice, weaving through the clumps of people who’re still frozen up to the ankles. It would probably be faster to run forward on his own, but Hitoshi isn’t winning any races on his own stamina, so it seems wise to save that energy for the inevitable obstacle that he won’t be able to get someone else to do for him.

In front of him, the students of class 1-A shout at each other. Bakugou Katsuki blasts himself forward with his explosions, in hot pursuit of the boy with the candy cane hair. The pink skinned girl glides easily over the ice. The boy with the tail barely touches the ground as he springs off it with powerful and well-practiced motions. Hitoshi watches them, chin propped in his hand, elbow resting on his knee.

“They’re used to using their quirks,” he tells the boy at the head of the carry formation. Of course, the boy doesn’t reply, doesn’t react at all, since it’s not an order. “Explosions are an easy thing to practice. He probably had people begging him to show it off. Bet they never threatened to put him in – I don’t know, steel gloves or something, just so he couldn’t use it.” Hitoshi sneers, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. There is still a small divot there, invisible except to his fingertips.

A loud crash brings him back to the present, but the hulking green metal beast in the middle of the track nearly threatens to send him tumbling back into bitter recollections. Gears and hydraulics grind together audibly as the thing turns towards the students, several of

whom trip over themselves in their attempts to abruptly reverse their momentum. The lenses within its eye rotate, red light dancing over the glass.

“Targets found,” an electronic voice announces. Then it adds, with a sadistic glee that machinery should not be capable of, “Lots!”

Fucking *robots*. Just great. Right in Hitoshi’s skillset.

Izuku walks into the stadium with a mob of seventy-some general education students who pay him no attention. They are all occupied with each other, excited or nervous as they bunch together in little friend groups. On the fringes of the crowd, Wallflower tingles against Izuku’s skin. There is no real, tangible sensation associated with using the quirk, but the knowledge that it is active – that he can slip by unnoticed, his presence crystal clear and unobtrusive – settles over his shoulders like a heavy blanket.

Of course, Wallflower isn’t effective in photo or video. Izuku darts occasional nervous glances to drones hovering around. Certainly, he is on TV, somewhere, a blur of green and navy caught in some broad overhead shot, but for the most part, the cameras either take the whole scene in from an anonymous distance or focus on the hero students.

At the center of the arena, Midnight – quirk: Somnambulist – stands on a small stage, one hand on her hip, the other gesturing with a multi-tasseled flog. His interactions with “Auntie Nemuri” – self-proclaimed, very loudly, upon their first meeting in the staff room – have all been rather brief, but this is his first time seeing her in her hero regalia in person. One of his notebooks – volume 11, page 73 – has a full redesign of her costume. He had only been twelve or thirteen when he made it, so it’s a bit outdated at this point, but he wonders if it would be too presumptuous to share it with her, anyway. She’s a grown woman, of course, and she can dress however she likes, it’s just – well, it doesn’t look particularly comfortable? Or practical, for that matter. And it feels a little indecent to actually look at her.

Anyway, that’s irrelevant. She cracks her flog, a surprisingly sharp sound for how small it is, probably to cut off trains of thought exactly like Izuku’s. Dutifully, he gives her his attention, and pointedly does

not think about how a better chest piece could be made that actually provides coverage and support while still paying homage to a harness.

“Quiet, everyone!” she calls. “It’s time for our player pledge! Representing the students this year is Bakugou Katsuki, from class 1-A!”

“*That* guy?” someone – minor transformation quirk, based in their hands – asks, under their breath, but still too loud to be discrete.

“He did finish first in the entrance exam,” Sero Hanta – quirk: Tape – says, smiling sheepishly.

“Maybe on the *heroics* exam,” another person – emitter quirk, something to do with minerals – scoffs. Katsuki had been near the top of the written exam, as well, Izuku happens to know. Nedzu is far to liberal with the information he allows Izuku to access, and the students’ scores and rankings were noted right alongside the recordings from their practical exams, which Izuku has already watched at least three times.

Katsuki stands on the stage, glare harsh and unwavering as he waits, settling for nothing less than everyone’s full attention. “I pledge that I’ll be number one,” he says finally, voice crackling through speakers from all directions. The silence that Katsuki waited for breaks in an instant. Groans from class A, including a boisterous scolding from Iida Tenya – quirk: Engine. Indignant shouts from class B, scoffs and sneers from the other courses. Katsuki’s eyes – red, fierce, and indifferent to the outcry – skim over the crowd, resting on Izuku for a chilling half second before sliding away.

“At least be nice stepping stones for me,” Katsuki adds. And that is apparently all he has to say. He tosses the microphone to Midnight without even looking at her and hops down from the stage.

“How overconfident can you get?!” class B’s Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu – quirk: Steel – yells, straining against the arms of a classmate who seems to be considering just letting him have at it. Katsuki doesn’t spare him a glance, standing with his jaw set next to an exasperated Kirishima Eijiro – quirk: Hardening.

Izuku sighs softly to himself. Katsuki is… different than he remembers. Different and also painfully unchanged. Giving his all, to the exclusion of caring what anyone else has to bring to the table. Obsessed with a very particular kind of strength. Stubborn and rigid to the point of severity, sometimes even savagery. But he is probably the

least confident Izuku has ever seen him. Overconfident people don't clench their fists and glare at the world like it is an enemy to be defeated.

"Now, let's gets started right away," Midnight announces, compensating for Katsuki's spectacle with even more theatric bravado. "Our first game will be the qualifier! Every year, countless sports festival hopefuls become sports festival has-beens in this round. Let's see if you have what it takes, shall we?"

Izuku stands up straight. He knows she isn't talking to him – she may know he's here, but she can't even see him. The words are for each and every student there, over 200 people, but of all of them, Izuku is willing to bet that he has the most to prove. Prove he has what it takes, prove he's worth it, prove it isn't a mistake to give him this chance. Prove that he can be something more than what he has been so far.

Several others in the crowd stand straighter as well, square their shoulders as if Midnight is talking to them, specifically. Izuku may have the most to prove, but he is not the only one here with a purpose. One way or another, dreams will be crushed today. Do they have what it takes? The only way you learn to fly is by falling and hoping you don't hit the ground.

Midnight makes a production of revealing the first event, but Izuku pays little attention to the dramatics. First, they'll be doing an obstacle course race, then a cavalry battle, and finally the one-on-one matches that always determine the winner. The events were decided before Izuku arrived at UA, likely close to the beginning of the year, possibly even earlier. Izuku has known about each event since his third day at the school.

It's not like he went snooping on purpose. It's just that Nedzu is sometimes very careless about the information he leaves laying around his office. Well, "careless" and "laying around" are probably an obtuse way of putting it, since Izuku is reasonably certain the principal did it intentionally. He's reasonably certain the principal does *everything* intentionally. Izuku ignored the plans when he first saw them, but later that day they had worked their way into his English packet – appropriately translated and everything, so he hadn't even realized what they were right away.

So, by the end of his third day, Izuku had known the structure of the sports festival, though not any of the details as to what the events

would contain. He's still uncertain whether Nedzu's deliberate dispensing of inside information is some kind of test or a genuine attempt to assist him. Knowing Nedzu, it could very well be a mix of both, but Izuku doubts he'll ever get an answer, either way.

When the crowd suddenly swarms towards the gates leading out onto the course, Izuku hangs back. At this point, leading the pack would be counter intuitive – it wouldn't gain him anything in the long term, and the dubious honor of being at the front would inevitably draw attention to him, even with Wallflower active. Besides, the tunnel on the other side of the gate is a long, narrow thing, an obvious choke point that's going to result in at least several dozen eager front runners getting jostled and bruised and far more exhausted than they should be this early in the competition. Izuku shudders slightly just at the thought of being pressed in so closely to so many people.

The gates open and the crowd floods through, immediately clogging the tunnel. Izuku waits and counts in his head.

It takes six and a half seconds for the real race to start.

It is Todoroki Shouto – quirk: Half-Cold Half-Hot – who starts it. As one of the hero course's powerhouses, with a quirk well suited crowd control, it's no surprise that he's the one taking the initiative. When it comes to flashy and game changing displays of quirk use, Todoroki was really one of very few candidates for kicking things off properly, far more than three lights and a buzzer ever could.

After all, this isn't a middle school foot race. This is UA's sports festival. This is where heroes are born.

Todoroki's onslaught has left over half of the students in the tunnel and just beyond it frozen fast to the ground. With the race moving forward, Izuku finally enters the tunnel himself, weaving carefully through the trapped students, more concerned about accidentally bumping into one of them than he is about the ice.

Enhancement quirks are incredibly common, and thus something Izuku has in abundance – strength, speed, senses, reflexes, balance, you name it. Izuku has multiple of each, and it is a simple matter to activate a couple of well-practiced ones to handle the situation. Balance, to keep his feet; reflexes to give him the reaction time he needs to make adjustments as soon as he starts to slip.

It is quirks like these that Izuku is planning to use to carry himself as far as possible in the festival. Versatile, and powerful in that

versatility, but unobtrusive, sometimes even unnoticeable if properly applied.

The subtle interplay of multiple slight improvements is effective, but it is nothing compared to what is happening ahead of him.

Kirishima Eijiro – quirk: Hardening – laughs, adrenaline giddy as he leaps over the wave of ice that has consumed the entire beginning of the course, creeping high up the wall around the tunnel mouth. Aoyama Yuga – quirk: Navel Laser – propels himself forward without touching the ground, winking to the people stuck behind him. Yaoyorozu Momo – quirk: Creation – produces a strong, thin pole from her palm, vaulting the ice with grim determination. It takes only a second for Ojiro Mashirao – quirk: Tail – to find a clean patch of ground and use it to spring himself to safety. And with Dark Shadow's aid, avoiding the ground is trivial for Tokoyami Fumikage – quirk:–

Actually, it is probably best not to think about that, right now. After spending so much time suppressed, the influx of information from Izuku's quirk is novel and nearly overwhelming. To be around so many people, all actively using such amazing quirks is a fascination that Izuku can't currently afford to be distracted by.

"You half-and-half bastard!" Katsuki shouts, voice almost shrill compared to the bone-rumbling bass of his explosions. "You're not getting away that easy, fucking coward!"

Todoroki, running with ice chasing his heels, looks back over his shoulder for a brief moment, not slowing as he quickly assesses his classmates. He says nothing in response before turning away, leaning forward as he pushes himself to move faster. Katsuki screams behind him, a wordless sound of frustration as the distance separating them remains stagnant.

Kirishima shouts as well, but his sharp-toothed grin speaks more of excitement than anger. "That's so man–" He is slammed to the side, exclamation cut off by a grunt. He goes flying, rolling to the ground nearly ten feet from where he had been, but he pops up unharmed only a moment later.

"Warn a guy!" he shouts at the robot that just flicked him aside like a piece of lint. Its eye glints, red light wavering as the aperture within it expands and contracts with a series of soft clicks.

"Targets found," the robot declares. "Lots!"

Distantly, Izuku hears Mic shouting about the “Robo Inferno” as a swarm of massive robots become visible beyond this cluster of smaller ones. He has watched the footage of the entrance exams enough times to immediately identify each of the robots, even down to their assigned point values. He hadn’t liked them then, somewhat blurry on a computer monitor, and he doesn’t like them now, solid and imposing and less than thirty feet away.

“Aren’t those the zero point villains from the entrance exam?” Kaminari Denki – quirk: no, focus Izuku – asks, a nervous lilt to his voice. He takes half a step backwards, but then seems to catch himself, steeling his stance.

“Seriously? The hero course had to fight *those?*”

“This is what they meant by obstacles?!”

“There’s too many! What are we supposed to do?”

The outcry from the general education and business students is mixed anxiety and indignation, and Izuku can’t say he blames them. As much as the sports festival is lauded as a school event, it’s not. Not really. It’s a hero course event. They’re the stars, the ones set up to succeed, to *benefit*, and everyone else is just an extra body to the head count, to make things seem just a little bit more competitive. After all, it’s far more interesting to pick only three winners out of over 200, rather than a measly forty.

And if you *weren’t* in the hero course, but you *wanted* to be? Then hopefully you spent the months since the entrance exam learning to fight robots.

“So, this is what they used in the general entrance exam?” Todoroki asks. He sounds as unimpressed as Izuku feels, though it’s hard to say if he also thinks the robots are ridiculous or if that’s just the way his voice is.

“I wonder where they got the money for it,” Yaoyorozu says. Like Todoroki, she is unintimated by the army of titans in front of them, her voice only idly curious, even as one of the robots begins to reach forward, its splayed-out claw larger than any person.

Todoroki sighs. “All this trouble for nothing. I wish they would have at least prepared something more impressive. Give my stupid old man something to watch.”

The zero pointer is fast for its size, and by the time Todoroki's last, bitter word falls from his mouth, it is close enough to him that Izuku's whole body has gone tense, prepared to move at a moment's notice, in case he needs to take action. But Todoroki merely glares at the obstacle, mismatched eyes glacial.

Frost builds up along his right arm, pale blue and sparkling in the sun. When Todoroki puts that hand to the ground, ice blooms in a perfect circle around him. With rapt attention, Izuku watches Todoroki drag his fingers along the dirt, raising his arm in a wide, sweeping arc. The gesture is almost casual – confident and decisive, but lacking force, a fluidly graceful movement. The surge of ice that follows the movement is, in contrast, powerful and jagged. It races up the zero pointer's arm, halting the robot's movements almost instantly. Ice crackles and metal groans. In seconds, the only army green metal left exposed is near the very top of the bot's head, crags of ice rising around it like a crown. The entire zero pointer, hundreds of feet tall, frozen in a single, simple act.

Todoroki exhales, slow and measured. His breath billows in front of him, a cold white fog that drifts away on the breeze. He fists his hand in front of him, still hovering in the air where the swipe of his arm ended, still speckled with glittering crystals of frost. For a moment, it is like everything is frozen, like the entire obstacle course and everyone on it is just as trapped in place as that robot.

Todoroki himself is the first one to shatter the stillness, running forward along the path between the robot's legs. As monstrous as it is, the zero pointer casts a large shadow, but sunlight bounces oddly between the facets of the ice, and strange, wavering reflections dance over Todoroki's skin as he passes underneath.

"He stopped them," someone breathes as the rest of the crowd starts to stir.

"Follow him," someone else says, awed disbelief beginning to fade back into the frantic determination of competition. "Through the legs, there's a path!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Todoroki shouts back over his shoulder. "It was already unbalanced when I froze it. It'll fall over."

On cue, the ice creaks. A wide fissure traces up the zero pointer's base as huge sheets of ice start to crack away from its reaching arm. They shatter when they hit the ground, shrapnel flying in all directions. A

sliver scrapes against Izuku's cheek, a cold needle that melts against his skin in only a few seconds. More and more ice gives way, a cataclysmic reaction that goes from bad to worse, only speeding up as it continues along. People stumble out of the way, making frenzied dives to the sides as the zero pointer wobbles.

Then, exactly as Todoroki predicted, the entire thing comes crashing down.

Izuku, already safe exactly where he is, stares at the carnage.

"Todoroki Shouto from class 1-A!" Mic shouts, drawing out the syllables of the name. "In one move, he made an opening for himself and closed it for everyone else! An attack and a defense all in one! How elegant! Amazing!"

"His actions are logical and strategic," Eraser agrees, practically effusive praise coming from him.

"As expected of a recommendation student! And the son of the number two hero, at that! Those Robo Infernos never stood a chance!"

And as the dust settles and the yelling starts up again, Izuku can't help but wonder – who exactly is Todoroki Shouto? And what is he trying to prove?

Chapter End Notes

> Character limits are a bitch, more memes
> Goat: X
> Lemon: X
> Nellie: X X X X X X X X
> Rhia: X X X X
> Surya: X X X
>
> Hitoshi: If people could stop expecting me to fight robots, that'd be great
>
> Izuku: I don't want to take over the world
> Nedzu: It's okay, we can fix that
>
> Katsuki: It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you, and it's not overconfidence if I can actually kick their ass.
>
> Me: I have a very detailed outline, it helps a lot with getting my writing done

My outline: The first event of the sports festival,,, happens.
Me: *shit*

Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part II
(tentative) Update: Feb 18
(knowing me, half-cold half-hot is going to be, like, 17 parts)

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part II

Chapter Notes

> Uuuuuuggggghhh writing the sports festival is HARD. I spent nearly two hours earlier this week figuring out the logistics of the next two rounds, but does that help me write action scenes? No, no it does not.
>
> Discord memes!
> Cloud: X X X X X X X
> Finch: X
> Howie: X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh WOW, the hero course really does get all the best stuff! Mei has heard rumors, of course, about the practical exam that pit hero students against marvelous mechanics, exciting examples of engineering, big beautiful bots, and Maijima-Sensei had indulged some of her questions near the beginning of term, but nothing compares to getting to see them in person. The one, two, and three pointers – well, they're cute, for sure, but the zero pointers – *the zero pointers!* Mei wants to take one apart and climb inside and figure out how it works. As big as they are, she could probably spend weeks – no, months! – crawling around its wiring and wouldn't that just be a *dream*.

Of course, she can't really get close to one without it trying to kill her. Actually, no – this is a school event, after all, so she would probably only end up lightly maimed at worst, but what a way to go! Frosty really did her a favor, knocking over that first one. No death or maiming required, just her and what seems like miles of steel and copper. The fall has even knocked off some of the outer paneling – which is a shame, such a shame to see such a beauty broken to bits, BUT–! But this way she has free access to its inner workings! Which is perfect because robots actually *are* more beautiful on the inside – unlike people, who are actually just very wet and squishy on the inside, no matter what everyone says.

She scrambles up over the zero pointer's arm to get a look at the joint there. Her hover boots are a big help in scaling the smooth plates, just like she knew they would be! She splays herself out over the metal, ignoring the ice-chill of it that seeps through her gym uniform,

focusing her eyes until the intricate wiring and segmented metal sections of the elbow take up her entire field of view. It's brilliant! One of the best things she's ever seen, maybe, and AHHH she wishes she had a notebook with her.

Thank god for the marker she keeps with her goggles. There's a little pocket along the side of the band specifically for her to slip in her favorite drafting pen – this way she never needs to worry about losing it. A pen is an indispensable tool for anyone with a creative mind, after all! Paper – well, paper *would* be nice, but that's an easy thing to work around. Now, Mei generally wouldn't recommend drawing a schematic on your arm – it's hard to keep measurements and angles true to life on an elastic, curved surface – but it'll do in a pinch! Ideas have to be seized as soon as they present themselves, even if that means making do with improvised tools.

One moment, Mei is sketching away, tongue poking out slightly in concentration – and the next she is on the ground, a metallic taste coating the roof of her mouth.

Accidents happen to Mei all the time. Explosions are part of the process, after all, and sometimes that process happens directly in her face while she's focused on some detail or another. So, she's quick at bouncing back – it's one of her many very impressive talents! Which is why it only takes her a couple of blinks to recover after the quick swish and CRASH that have her sliding over and off the zero pointer's arm and onto the hard packed dirt of the obstacle course track. She licks blood off her teeth, sticking her tongue out and crossing her eyes to see the shallow bite marks there.

"Oh my god, are you a-alright?" A boy slides down the side of the robot's arm, knees bending to absorb the impact as he lands. OH, that reminds her – shock absorption! There's probably lots of cool babies for that, and Mei hasn't made *any* yet. What a terrible oversight.

"Oh no," Mei says as she sits up.

"I didn't h-hurt you, did I?!" the boy asks as Mei looks around. "I'm so s-sorry, it's just, there was this three pointer, and you seemed really d-distracted so I–"

"Have you seen my pen?" Mei interrupts. "It's a *really* good pen and I *need* it!"

"Y-your pen…?"

“Yeah! It’s black, approximately yea long,” she holds her fingers and appropriately pen-sized distance apart to illustrate. “It’s got pink tape on it! With yellow stars! I was using it when I fell, it must have flown off somewhere. Say, did you push me or something?” The boy opens and closely his mouth wordlessly and after a moment of that, Mei waves him off. “Yeah, okay, that’s not important! Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to help me find my pen!” The boy blinks at the finger Mei points at him like he is staring down the barrel of a gun, and she giggles at the dumbfounded expression smeared across his face.

“I, uh – alright?”

As silly as his wide eyes and slack mouth are, Mei has to give it to the boy – he is a very dedicated and adept pen-finder! By the time she is done checking over all her babies to make sure none of them got damaged in that nasty fall, he is already done. She gasps happily when he hands it over.

Next to her smudged and half-complete diagram of the zero pointer’s wiring, Mei jots down a note about shock absorption. When she looks back up, the boy is gone.

Here are some facts about Hitoshi.

The first is that he recently went through a growth spurt. He went from 5’7” to 5’10” in only a few weeks, and he’s still growing, steadily creeping closer to 5’11”. These days, his dad regularly laments the constant need to buy him new pants. Hitoshi’s uniform is already a touch too short around his ankles and wrists, even though they had intentionally been slightly too long at the start of term.

The second follows from the first: Hitoshi does not have a particularly good sense of balance. It’s not that he’s clumsy, per say, but he’s still getting used to all of his limbs suddenly being in new places. So yeah, he sometimes bumps into things or trips over himself – whatever, sue him, he’s a teenaged boy and puberty is a bitch.

The third and final fact is that Hitoshi isn’t a fan of heights. To be perfectly clear, he isn’t *afraid* of them. He’s just not a fan. Which is pretty normal, really. Who actually *likes* heights? That would be

weird. Not liking heights is just the default human condition, and it's not a big deal or anything, but sure, they make him a little uncomfortable and that's all instinct.

These three things combined find Hitoshi standing at the edge of The Fall – a bit on the nose, that name – with his eyes closed for just a moment while he takes a bracing breath. First robots, now this shit. Hitoshi had known coming into the festival that things would be stacked against him, that he would have to fight like hell to get through, but this is starting to feel a little personal.

He doesn't bother with trying to tightrope walk across. He just bids his dignity goodbye and hopes that all the cameras are too occupied with the flashy hero students to pay attention to the random gen ed kid who managed to work his way up the ranks. His thighs burn as he crosses his legs around the rope and shimmies along; his palms burn from gripping the coarse fibers; his ears and neck burn from embarrassment that he stoically pretends not to be feeling.

Man, he really should have nabbed that support girl when he had the chance. Who the hell knows what her quirk is, but who the hell cares when she has all those gadgets to do the job for her. She had a *jetpack*. Hitoshi could have been *jetpacking* across, right now. Doing things on his own power really is overrated.

Progress is uncomfortable, but it's steady. Hitoshi, at the very least, is still in the race, which is more than can be said for the poor fools he sees losing their grip and falling all around him. He's doing well – well enough to be proud of himself along side the bitter frustration of the situation and the irritated disgust of sweat dripping into his eyes. All the frustration and discomfort and embarrassment will be worth it, when he makes it to the other side. And he is going to make it, he's certain of that much.

Or at least, he is until some idiot – some idiot, some flash bastard, some hero course *asshole* – leaps over Hitoshi like he is a hurdle in a fucking track competition. The rope shudders, waves of movement traveling up and down its entire length, and just like that, Hitoshi loses his grip, like all the poor fools he was lamenting mere moments ago.

God. His father is going to be so smug. Sympathetic and consoling, but with that undercurrent of *this is for the best,* because he's known all along that Hitoshi was never *meant* to be a hero. It'll all be easier, when Hitoshi comes to see it, too. He can choose a nice, stable career,

and maybe his peers will cut him some slack now that he isn't actively antagonizing their worldviews. Why did he even want to be a hero, anyway? It's dangerous and unreliable and people won't care so much about his quirk if he isn't always calling attention to it by insisting that he's going to be a *hero.* Hitoshi's father will make him his favorite dinner and tell him that he did well, but some things aren't meant to be, and then Hitoshi will be expected to move on, once and for all.

If Hitoshi's dreams die here, he is going to *haunt the shit* out of whoever made him fall.

There is a stomach-lurching moment where gravity grabs at Hitoshi's limbs, and then everything goes sideways and Hitoshi crashes against sun-warm rock instead of sea of foam beneath The Fall. Somehow, he has made his way to the next platform, still in the race, despite feeling like he's been hit by a truck – or maybe something smaller, like a particularly reckless bicyclist. Hitoshi groans, arm aching fiercely from wrist to shoulder as he flops onto his back, squinting into the sun.

"Are you alright?" a boy asks, leaning over Hitoshi. The sun halos the boy's head, casting sparks of emerald and gold around the edge of his hair.

"Did you – did you fucking *throw me* over here?" Hitoshi asks, disbelief coloring his tone. Whatever happened had happened so quickly that Hitoshi didn't really register it, but he has the impression of fingers around his wrist for the briefest moment, and now here he is, at least ten feet from where he had nearly fallen to his doom. The boy grimaces – and Hitoshi realizes that this is the same boy that he crashed into in the hallway last week, the one with the notebooks, who ran like Hitoshi had scared him.

"S-sorry," he says, apologizes, as if he didn't just save Hitoshi's ass in the middle of a competition. "I didn't want you to f-fall because of me. Are you alright?"

"I – what the fuck?" The boy scrambles back, crouched on the balls of his feet as Hitoshi sits up. He rotates his shoulder a few times, relieved to still able to move it fine, despite the soreness that has settled in. Of course he would be sore, given that *all of his weight* was just flung around from that single joint, Jesus Christ. "Who the hell are you?" Hitoshi asks, confusion coming off confrontational.

The boy smiles a small smile, something wobbly that feels even more like an apology than the actual word sorry did. He shakes his head

slightly, scans his eyes over Hitoshi – still sitting on the ground like an idiot – and jumps onto the next rope, moving down it with quick, precise steps despite the large sheet of metal that Hitoshi is only just noticing lashed to his back with a length of wire. The easy way the other boy moves invokes a dazed sort of envy in Hitoshi, something that would be sharp and acidic if all the bite hadn't been taken out of it by sheer befuddlement.

A hero student, must be. Hitoshi doesn't recognize him, apart from that one incident in the hall, but 1-B has flown under the radar far more than 1-A, so he could be one of them. Watching the way he moves over the ropes, considering the way he grabbed Hitoshi in a second and tossed him like he weighed *nothing* – he has to be in the hero course.

Soon, Hitoshi will be, too. Maybe then he can get some answers about what the hell the boy's deal is. But for that to happen, Hitoshi first needs to pick himself the hell back up and focus on what's in front of him.

Yuga wants to be an inspiration. He wants stars to be born in peoples' eyes when they look at him. He wants to be a beacon of light that never goes out. He wants to *shine* – and partially it is because of the praise, he will admit that. But mostly it is because he wants to cut through the darkness of the world and leave a bit of sparkle behind, something that, just by existing, can save people from getting swallowed by shadows.

This is what Yuga *wants* to be. All he *is* is pathetic. Pathetic, though he is usually very good at pretending not to be.

On his knees next to a minefield, there is no space for pretending. There is only him, and his quirk that sets fire to the raw edges of his insides, and tears that he can't allow himself to shed because he is supposed to be fabulous and glamorous.

He went overboard. One second is a ridiculous limit – not long enough to get anything done. In the beginning, with the robots, he told himself he was stronger. He has been training, he is going to be a hero, and it wouldn't hurt to push his limits just a little. And it didn't. A twinge, something sharp but brief, gone within the space of a

breath. But then he did it again, and one breath became two. Three, four, five.

Now he is on his knees, and he can't breathe at all.

Frustration burns in his chest, hotter than the pain in his stomach. Students pass him by, moving into the minefield that serves as the final obstacle between them and the rest of the festival. If Yuga were stronger, he could use his quirk to propel himself over if, call out his best wishes to those he leaves behind as he secures his place in the later events. As it is, his vision is doubling too hard for him to spot the mines beneath the ground, and the small earthquakes juddering through his bones would stop him from stepping between them, regardless.

"Are you alright?" someone asks, voice soft but abrupt enough to catch Yuga off guard. His neck is stiff with pain, resisting as he turns his head to see the speaker. A stranger, smudged with dirt, hovers a distance away.

"Je vais bien," Yuga chokes out, lie barely squeezing past the tense walls of his throat.

"You… don't look f-fine," the other boy says, taking a hesitant half step forward. "Did you get hit by something?"

Yuga wants to laugh, though he can barely even speak. "Non. It's – q-quirk." He hopes the boy takes the information and leaves. Yuga is not injured, is not victim of anything but himself, and it is shameful enough to have to live through it without having an interactive audience. He is in no mood to explain the ways in which he is broken.

"Oh. I can – I m-might be able to help." The boy shuffles closer, kneels within arm's reach. "I… have a healing q-quirk. I've never used it to help with b-backlash before, but I can t-try. If that's alright?"

Yuga gasps as his insides twist again, a vicious tearing feeling in his abdomen. He curls tighter into himself and nods, one sharp jerk of his head that sends the world spinning in a noxious blur of color. A second later, there is a hand on the back of his neck, cool against the tacky sweat beneath Yuga's hair. Yuga's heart pounds at his sternum like a trapped thing, too hard and too fast, but between one beat and the next, the painful coil in his stomach relaxes by increments until the only thing making his hands shake is the insubstantial aftershocks that echo through his cells, nearly a relief in comparison to the white-bright pain from before.

“Did that help?” the boy asks. This time, when Yuga nods, the world does not dissolve around him. The boy’s hand falls from the back of Yuga’s neck like a lost anchor, leaving Yuga reeling for another moment before he manages to ground himself.

The boy who has saved Yuga is not much to look at, nothing fabulous or glamourous about him. His dark hair is wild and untamed, and the shadows beneath his eyes cry out for concealer. There is a thin cut along his cheek bone that has left a smear of blood over his freckles. He is smudged with dirt, and his PE uniform fits him with the same unflattering bagginess of all the other students.

But when he smiles, he *shines*.

No one has ever died during the sports festival. People have gotten hurt, certainly, but despite the way it sometimes seems, the environment is carefully monitored and controlled to ensure that no one is ever in any real danger. Izuku is aware of this.

But he can’t stop himself from flinching when a girl’s ankle gives out beneath her, causing her to fall to the side and land hard on her hip. He helps her up, offers to heal her so she can keep going, but she shakes her head with tired lines around her eyes and tells him she just wants to go lay down. So instead, he lets her hold onto his arms for balance as she limps over to the sidelines, and he flags down a pair of the medical bots that herd the girl onto a stretcher and wheel her away.

And when a boy finds himself reduced to tears when he’s face to face with a two pointer, Izuku can’t help but put himself between them. And when one of the cameras flies a little too close to the boy, still crying and mortified because of it, Izuku can’t help but pick up a rock and knock the drone straight out of the air to give the boy a moment of privacy while he collects himself.

And Izuku can’t help but stop to give words of encouragement and comfort where they are needed. Half of the people he speaks to look at him like he is insane, but the other half smile, so Izuku keeps taking the gamble.

Seconds by minutes, he falls behind. Each exchange loses him time,

and he makes some of it up, but the rest of it slips away as Todoroki and Bakugou draw farther and farther ahead. Izuku doesn't know how many people are moving on to the next round. In previous years, the number has varied from fifty to thirty, and there are at least forty people in front of Izuku now, picking their ways across the final obstacle with focused care.

Izuku doesn't want to win this first event, but he *can't* lose. He owes the world too much to fail here, before he can even begin to pay back his debts.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Shouta thinks he already has a fairly good idea of how the first event will progress. Step by step, he is proven right. Todoroki puts on a massive display of power that is simultaneously strategic and painfully excessive, unbalancing all of his competitors outside of 1-A. His classmates rise to the challenge, egging each other on. Bakugou and Todoroki toss the upper hand around like a hot potato, undisputed contestants for first and second place. Class B, in contrast, seems largely unimpressive, but to a trained eye, there is no mistaking their skill, even if they aren't making as large a spectacle of it. For the most part, the students of the other courses fall behind at the very start and never even begin to catch up.

This is how it goes nearly every year. The first event is always the most predictable. Shouta can probably guess exactly where any student will end up ranking, give or take a few places.

Somewhere in that crowd though, there's a wild card. Shouta has been trying and failing to get eyes on Izuku since the students entered the arena. Somehow, the kid is harder to spot than Shouta's actually *invisible* student, who's seemingly-floating uniform has just reached the end of The Fall. When Izuku said he planned to avoid drawing attention to himself, Shouta had imagined a strategy more akin to that of some of the class B students. There must be a quirk at play, probably the same one Izuku used at the USJ to escape detection during the first half of the fight.

As Bakugou and Todoroki grow ever closer to the finish line, Shouta is hit with the sinking feeling that flying under the radar simply isn't in

the cards for his problem child. Like a premonition, an explosion shakes the field. Far larger than anything Bakugou has made, dust consumes the back half of the minefield, and it would be easy to miss the small form that breaks out of top of the smoke, if Shouta hadn't somehow known to look for it.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he sighs, indifferent to the microphone in front of him.

"Pay attention, Shigaraki Tomura."

"What's the point?" Tomura asks, hardly glancing up from his game. "The Todoroki brat makes ice, and little *Kacchan* blows things up. We already know their stats from the USJ."

"*Watch* and you may see something interesting."

Tomura scoffs but obliges for the moment, pausing his game, though not putting it down. On the television, the coverage of the sports festival is focused almost exclusively on the two boys competing for first place. Kurogiri watches with keen attention, as if there is actually anything worth seeing.

"This is boring," Tomura complains.

"Wait."

As if in response to Kurogiri's tense order, the camera rocks, fuzzing out for a moment as the shockwave of an explosion in the background interrupts the feed. A moment of silence in the explosion's wake is interrupted by a long bleep as one of the announcers is censored out.

"What's this?!" Present Mic exclaims, obnoxious voice too familiar from the number of evenings Tomura was forced to listen to his radio program. "There's been a huge explosion from the back! And if you look near the top – yes!" The camera cuts, switching to another drone high in the sky. Tomura freezes. "That's Midoriya Izuku, quickly closing the ranks with the force of that blast!"

Izuku flies through the air, trailing smoke behind him like a shooting star or a nuclear missile. The wind drags tears from his eyes and his

teeth are bared, savage and desperate.

“Hey, hey!” Present Mic yells. “Just like that, he’s taken the lead! Todoroki and Bakugou, united by a common enemy, stop fighting each other and focus on catching up to their new competition! Wait – hold on a sec. Looks like Midoriya’s losing altitude fast! Hopefully he’s got a good landing strategy, huh?” The other announcer is censored out again. Tomura’s game turns to dust in his grip. His fingers clench around the grit.

In seconds, Izuku manages to brace himself with a foot on each of the other boys’ shoulders, using the metal plate he was flying on to trigger another explosion. His competition staggers to the sides while Izuku goes flying forward once more, tucking himself into a ball to roll across the ground, popping up in a run.

“What a twist! Man, what is Nedzu teaching that kid?”

“He came that way.”

“Who would have seen it coming? Our unexpected first place – Midoriya Izuku!”

Through the television, the crowd’s cheer is an indistinct roar. Izuku’s face fills the screen, wide-eyed and overwhelmed. His cheeks are smudged with dirt and blood, and bruise-like shadows cling under his eyes. His lips tremble in an attempt at a smile, but it crumbles to pieces before anything can come of it. Tears eat tracks in the grime on his face. He ducks his head, buries his face in his hands. The camera cuts back to the tunnel, where Todoroki and Bakugou both claim second and third place.

“Breathe, Tomura,” Kurogiri instructs softly. Tomura’s gasp is like a gun shot.

“What are we waiting for?” Tomura asks. “We know where he is. Let’s end this.”

He cannot feel his mouth move, isn’t aware of his lips forming the words, but he hears his own voice in his ears. His face is hot, his hands are cold. His chest is tight, his head doesn’t feel like it’s connected to his body. There is a pressure behind his eyes, he wants to rip them out of his head to release it.

“You would be dead in moments if we went now.”

Tomura stares at the television. Izuku's face isn't on the screen anymore, but it is seared behind Tomura's eyelids. He will never unsee that boy, who is not his brother. That boy, whose face Tomura knows so well, whose name is like a knife between the shoulder blades.

"If I get to take him down with me, then so be it."

Chapter End Notes

Mic: I wonder where the little listener is
Izuku: *causes a massive explosion*
Aizawa: Found him

Hitoshi: Please god, let me have just one good day
Nedzu, with his robots: Ha, you again? Give it a rest, buddy!

(after running in to Izuku)
Hitoshi: He has a strength quirk
Aoyama: No, he has a healing quirk
Hitoshi: He literally grabbed me by the arm and tossed me nearly ten feet
Aoyama: He literally told me he has a healing quirk
Mei: Pen Finding
Hitoshi & Aoyama: What?
Mei: His quirk is Pen Finding.
(they both decide it's probably wisest not to argue)

Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part III
Update: Feb 25

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part III

Chapter Notes

> Hello again! Sorry about last week, but sometimes your body just says “stop it. get some help,” and forces you to take a break. (For clarification, I’m perfectly fine, I was just having some bad headaches that made it hard for me to write because I have Chronic Little Bitch Syndrome)
>
> I wish ao3 had statuses or something so I could update you guys on stuff like that real time, but hey – I guess that’s what the Discord is for. That and memes, of course.
>
> Cloud: X X X X X X
> Howie: X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ringing in Katsuki’s ears eclipses the roar of his pulse, but he can feel his heart beating in his arms, a heavy tattoo against the fragile skin of his wrists, pounding like a war drum. Broadcast in slow motion on every screen throughout the stadium, Katsuki watches his own face as Deku steals the win right out from under him – the gradual dawning of realization, followed by the instantaneous ignition of a fury.

Deku, *fucking Deku,* he came out of nowhere.

“Damn it,” Katsuki growls. “Damn it!” He can’t hear the words, but they vibrate in his throat. Where the hell had Deku come from? How the hell had this happened *again?*

Katsuki clutches at his forearm, squeezes the aching bones there and tells himself to get the fuck over the pain of it. Half-and-Half stands to the side, a step ahead, breath fogging the air in front of him in great plumes.

Second fucking place. Katsuki couldn’t even get second fucking place.

“Deku,” Katsuki says. He knows he says it, even if he’s still half deaf, because the icy-hot bastard looks over. He glances from Katsuki to Deku, recognition written over his usually unreadable features. But Deku himself doesn’t move, standing less than ten feet away – *too fucking close* – with his head lowered into his hands. He is trembling

faintly, a faint tremor that Katsuki can feel himself, like the aftershocks of a distant earthquake.

“Deku,” Katsuki repeats, louder this time, until he can hear the rasp of his own voice through the high-pitched whine in his head. Deku scrubs his hands over his face, rubs at his eyes. They are red-rimmed and glazed with tears when he looks up. His mouth forms the familiar shapes of Katsuki’s name.

“What the fuck was that,” Katsuki says. He hopes it sounds like a demand rather than a question. Izuku shakes his head and Katsuki gnashes his teeth. No answer, no explanation, no nothing. Only tears and tired eyes and a shake of the head, like Katsuki doesn’t deserve to know.

“Fucking answer me, you bastard,” Katsuki spits. Deku takes a half step back, hunching his shoulders up. It’s nearly gratifying, but only nearly, because the god damned worthless piece of shit still doesn’t say anything, looking at the ground like Katsuki isn’t even worth acknowledging.

Katsuki matches the half step back with two steps forward. If it were up to him, Deku would be as far away from Katsuki’s school as possible, but the shitty villain is already *here*. The measure of joy Katsuki takes when Deku cringes away from his advance is just compensation for all the fucked up shit Deku has done. Katsuki imagines pressing closer. Imagines backing Deku into a corner until he flees like the little coward Katsuki knows he is. Flees far away, where Katsuki will never have to see him again, and maybe this time he’ll actually have the brains to stay gone.

A heavy arm slings itself over Katsuki’s shoulder before the fantasy can become anything more than a twitch of his fingers. A snarl primed on his lips, Katsuki whirls to Shitty Hair, shoving the moron away as he tries to rest his spiky fucking head on Katsuki’s shoulder. The asshole huffs against the hand Katsuki shoves against his face, as if he’s been horribly wronged when he’s the one trying to put holes in Katsuki’s uniform with that ridiculous hair.

“Come on, bro,” the idiot cries, voice too loud, easily piercing the cotton in Katsuki’s ears. He pushes Katsuki’s hand away from his face. “I just made the top ten, I’m tired! Let me rest, come on!”

“Rest on the damn ground!”

“The ground?” Shitty Hair asks, gasping dramatically. “What kind of

bro leaves his bro on the ground?"

"The kind that thinks you're fucking heavy! Get off me."

Shitty Hair snaps his fingers with a grin. "So you admit we're bros, then!" Katsuki shoves him off his feet. He lands on his ass, laughing obnoxiously. He kicks at Katsuki's ankles, as if to knock him down as well, but Katsuki sidesteps easily on account of not being a clumsy fucking idiot. Scowling down at the other boy as his laughter tapers off, Katsuki can see the exact moment Shitty Hair's eyes flick to Deku.

"Hey!" he calls, cementing himself, once and for all, as a complete moron in Katsuki's mind. "You're that kid from the USJ! Deku, right?"

"It's I-Izuku, actually," Deku responds, pale as a sheet, both hands clenched into fists in the hem of his uniform. And of course he'll correct Shitty Hair, of course he'll do that when he'll barely even spare Katsuki a fucking glance. Katsuki growls, a vicious subverbal sound that makes most people edge away from him. Deku barely flickers a look at him. Shitty Hair kicks Katsuki in the ankle while he is distracted.

"What the fuck?!"

Shitty Hair scrunches up his nose. "Stop acting feral, dude," he says. "You're giving 1-A a bad reputation; everyone thinks we have rabies or something."

"Why the hell should I care?"

"*Do* you have rabies?" Shitty Hair squints, picking himself up off the ground and trying to lean in close to Katsuki's face. Katsuki headbutts him the moment he gets too close.

"I don't have fucking rabies!" Katsuki shouts. Deku giggles, a small sound that ignites Katsuki's temper like a match to gasoline.

He spins around, prepared to show the little thief exactly why no one should play with fucking fire, but Shitty Hair catches him with an elbow to the stomach, stepping between Katsuki and Deku with a bright grin. He slings his arm back around Katsuki's shoulder, a friendly gesture that threatens to become a restraint at any moment. As if the spiky bastard could actually stop Katsuki from doing anything if Katsuki really wanted to.

"Ignore him," Shitty Hair says brightly, rubbing with his free hand at

the red mark developing on his forehead. “He has rabies, you know how it is.”

“Y-yeah,” Deku says with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I, uh, I’m f-familiar.”

“Anyway, Deku – ah, sorry! Izuku. I’ve been meaning to say thanks!”

“Don’t fucking thank him!” Katsuki snaps. The arm around his shoulders tightens.

“T-thanks? I – no. W-why?”

“For the USJ, obviously. Standing up to those guys the way you did was super manly!”

“M-manly?”

“Yeah! You totally saved Bakubro’s skin. You know he – he may be kind of like a rabid dog, but he’s *our* rabid dog, yeah? So thanks!”

“I don’t – you s-shouldn’t be th-th-thanking m-me.” Katsuki hates to agree with Deku about anything, but even a stopped clock is right twice a day. He bares his teeth.

“Well, I am! Deal with it! I’m Kirishima Eijiro, by the way. I think it’s super manly that you’re doing rehabilitation or whatever, so hopefully we can be friends!”

And then, the crowning glory of all idiocy, the final stupid cherry on top of an entire moronic cake – Shitty Hair offers his hand to Deku. Grinning and fucking clueless, completely ignoring all the times Katsuki has told him to stay the *fuck away* from *fucking Deku*. Katsuki squirms against the grip he’s caught in, elbowing Shitty Hair in the side, but the bastard just tightens his arm around Katsuki’s shoulders until he practically has Katsuki in a headlock.

“Don’t mind him,” Shitty Hair says as Katsuki growls and Deku eyes the offered hand. “He won’t bite. Actually, he probably would, but I won’t let him, so don’t worry!”

“Like you could fucking stop me!” Katsuki spits. He considers biting Shitty Hair right there and then, just to prove the point, but he doesn’t know where the idiot has been and Katsuki’s not dumb enough himself to risk actually catching something.

“I’m not afraid of Kacchan,” Deku says softly. Katsuki wonders how big of an explosion he would need to get Shitty Hair to let go of him. As obnoxious as the spiky haired bastard is, Katsuki isn’t particularly keen on the idea of hurting him outside of training, but the dumbass is playing with fucking fire and it’s better he gets burned by Katsuki than Deku.

“Oh man, you call him Kacchan? That’s awesome!”

“Don’t you fucking dare repeat that! I’ll kill you!”

Katsuki glares as Deku finally takes Shitty Hair’s hand. The contact is brief, perfunctory, and the moment it is over, Deku is making a break for it, dodging through the slowly thickening crowd of finished students, as if he has somewhere to be. Shitty Hair relaxes his grip on Katsuki, grin wide and naively satisfied. Katsuki pops a small warning explosion and then swings a much larger one at Shitty Hair’s face. Eyes wide and smile disappearing, the idiot blocks it with his arm. His sleeve falls down his forearm, revealing jagged facets of quirk-enforced skin.

“What was that for?!” Shitty Hair demands, pouting like Katsuki kicked his puppy.

“Fucking deserved it,” is all Katsuki says in response, shaking Shitty Hair’s arm off his shoulder. He lets one last explosion dance over his palm while Shitty Hair sticks his tongue out – second-checking, reassuring.

Hitoshi places 27th. There are 40 hero students every year and Hitoshi – Hitoshi in general education, Hitoshi with the villain quirk, Hitoshi who doesn’t have what it takes to be a hero – places 27th. He can’t help but grin to himself as he watches the places behind him fill.

UA may be the best hero school in the country, but there’s one thing they really just don’t understand, and Hitoshi himself if a prime example of it. As far as UA is concerned, strength is being able to beat up robots. All the students who got in were robot-strong, and Hitoshi wasn’t, so he didn’t get in. But people-strong is an entirely different thing than robot-strong. Thinking and adapting instead of just brute forcing is something that robots can’t really prepare you for, not when

you already have the power to blast them into pieces. There are at least thirteen robot-strong hero students who aren't *Hitoshi*-strong. He beat them, after all.

And he'll beat them again. Again and again, however many times it takes.

Even if he has to fight in a god damned cavalry battle.

Jesus Christ. Hitoshi really is the butt of this joke, isn't he? First the robots, then the heights, then the mines. Granted, Hitoshi doesn't have anything specifically against landmines, but at the same time – *they're explosions* – they're explosions and he's a fifteen-year-old beanpole. He may have managed to get through it with impressive speed and grace, if he does say so himself – which he does, even if he may definitely be lying on at least one of those fronts – but it's still pretty far from an ideal matchup.

And now it's team activities. Hitoshi loves a good team activity. Eagerly looks forward to them. Misses them when they're not happening. Yep. Definitely.

Sarcasm, as Hitoshi's father will inform anyone who will listen, is Hitoshi's favorite defense mechanism.

Here's the thing - people don't team up with Hitoshi. He's always the last person left, and then he's awkwardly paired up with whatever other social outcast gets pushed to the fringes. Or worse, he's tacked onto a pre-existing group, an afterthought that everyone else resents. And actually *contributing* to groups? That's made pretty difficult when people get jumpy whenever he tries to say anything. God forbid he *has a question*, someone might actually try to burn him at the stake.

Now here he is, the only gen ed student who made it to the second event. On one hand – *hell yes*, screw all his classmates who rolled their eyes at him because *he* made it and *they* didn't, so get *fucked.* On the other hand – none of these hero students are going to want to pair up with the random gen ed kid with the unknown quirk when they have actual friends who have actual training.

Sure enough, as soon as Midnight makes the announcement, people are beelining to each other, clumping together in decided groups, or crowding around particularly desirable peers. Man, it must feel good to be someone like Bakugou or Todoroki, born with everything they ever needed to have their dreams handed to them on silver platters. He wonders what the sports festival looks like through their eyes. Just

a school event. An important opportunity at most, rather than the single thing that will make or break the rest of their life.

He catches sight of the green haired boy – Midoriya Izuku, Hitoshi knows now, after the spectacle the boy caused. Midoriya stands frozen on the edge of the crowd, not the center, though Hitoshi would have expected him to be mobbed like the other major players in the game. But no, he's just standing there, apart from everyone else, almost like they don't even see him. And he's got such ridiculously big eyes. That was the first thing Hitoshi ever noticed about Midoriya, and he notices it again now, because they are so wide and so hollow.

Midoriya looks like Hitoshi feels. Anxious, a bit hopeless, more than a bit desperate. Like he would rather disappear than deal with this, but simultaneously wishes he could just *deal with it* in the same easy way everyone else seems to. Like this single thing will make or break the rest of his life and he's looking over the precipice of *breaking* and wondering how he's meant to keep the pieces together.

Maybe, somehow, Midoriya is like Hitoshi. Maybe, *somehow*, he doesn't have anyone. And maybe that means they can be the solution to each other's problem.

Hitoshi has only half thought the thought when Midoriya is set upon. Hatsume Mei – who Hitoshi recognizes by virtue of her being one of only two other non-hero students to make it through the qualifiers – pounces on Midoriya from behind. Midoriya nearly jumps out of his skin but relaxes when he turns to her. A blonde boy slides up to the pair, striking a pose with his arms extended. Midoriya grins at him, nodding. Suddenly he doesn't look so alone or hollow or desperate. Hitoshi thinks he was probably just projecting to begin with.

It makes sense that Midoriya has friends. He has some kind of amazing quirk, and he's clearly skilled with using it. Probably never doubted that he could be a hero, and why would he? The way he screwed Hitoshi over and then saved him a second later? That has limelight heroics written all over it. Hitoshi really doesn't vibe with that kind of power and flash. Starting out with 10,000,000 points would have been bad for him, anyway. He already has a plan, and it requires *not* drawing a ridiculous amount of hostile attention right from the get-go.

It also requires Brainwashing at least two – preferably three – people, so Hitoshi should probably get on that. He walks up to a group of two, placing a hand on each of their shoulders as he insinuates himself

between them. The first boy, on the shorter side, with pale blue hair and a round face jumps but offers Hitoshi a questioning smile. The second, a blonde, raises an imperious eyebrow with a smile that seems far more confident and far less sincere. Hitoshi recognizes them both in that they finished after he did, which is ideal for keeping their total point value low.

“Looking for a third?” Hitoshi asks.

“Oh, we’re not–”

“No thanks.”

“Perfect,” Hitoshi says as both their eyes glaze over. “Two for one deal. Stay close to me.”

Hitoshi scans the crowd for other stragglers. He’ll want to catch someone alone, or he risks other students growing wise to what he’s doing. After a moment, he catches sight of someone separate from the clusters of people. The boy seems to be making his way to somewhere and Hitoshi orders his current minions to stay put before moving to intercept the new minion-prospect.

“Hey!” Hitoshi calls to get the boy’s attention. “Do you need a team?”

The boy doesn’t really stop, but he does glance back. “No, sorry–”

Now he stops, frozen in Hitoshi’s grasp. He has a tail, Hitoshi realizes. What a happy accident. Hitoshi doesn’t really know how much influence his quirk has over the quirks of those under his control, and it’s not something that’s easy to investigate when he doesn’t even know what quirks the people have. But a tail? If he can tell someone to move their arm, he can tell them to move their tail.

“Follow me,” Hitoshi tells Tail-Boy, leading the way back to the other two, Blue-Boy and Blonde-Boy. No, Tail-Boy is also blonde, so that won’t work. Tail-Boy, Blue-Boy, and Asshole – the third one just seems like an asshole. Hitoshi would know; like recognizes like.

“Here’s the plan,” he tells them. “I’ll be the rider. We’ll stick to the edges and pick off headbands from the lower ranked teams. Remember – quantity over quality.” His audience is silent. Hitoshi is pretty sure they can’t actually hear him. Or, more accurately, they hear him, but if it’s not an order, they don’t process it. Don’t process it, don’t remember it when they come to – might as well be talking to himself, really.

“Sounds like a plan?” Hitoshi asks. Of course, his teammates, if they can really be called that, don’t answer. He sighs. “Sounds like a plan.”

The problem isn’t the teams. Izuku can think of dozens of amazing team compositions and strategies. There are clear front runners among the students who have qualified, but the right team ups could completely overthrow that status quo, and every single person in the arena has the potential to be an amazingly valuable asset. No, the problem isn’t the teams.

The problem is Izuku.

Because how is he meant to fit into any of them? All the ambitious teams will be gunning for the 10,000,000 points. The points a liability, and no one here has any reason to have confidence that Izuku can protect them. The majority of them have no idea who he is, where he came from, or what he can do. If they recognize him at all, it’s as a villain, as a person who terrorized them mere weeks ago. Izuku has strategy, but teamwork is built on trust, which he neither has nor deserves. Which means *he’s* a liability.

At this rate, he’s going to end up disqualified. He won’t be able to make a team, so he won’t be able to continue, much less win. Then they won’t be able to transfer him to the hero course, and after that it’s only a matter of time before Nedzu and Eraser and Mic all start to wonder why they’re actually bothering with him. He’ll take up all their time and their resources and if he’s not in the hero course it’s not like he’ll be able to give anything in return and then they’ll realize what a mistake they made and Izuku will be tossed in jail like he probably should have been from the beginning. And then when Tomura comes for him Izuku will be sitting on a thin prison mattress in some concrete cell deep underground, and he can’t save *anyone* in that position, least of all Tomura. So he’ll die a painful but quiet death and the world will hardly even notice and Tomura will be worse off than he ever was before Izuku went and fucked everything up so everything Izuku has done will just be an exercise in seeing how many regrets one boy can gather. And if there’s an afterlife, his father will meet him in hell and–

When Izuku is tackled from behind, his first thought is that he probably deserves whatever attack some 1-A student must be

launching on him. His second thought, a few delayed seconds later, is that that maniacal giggling doesn't belong to anyone in 1-A, but it is familiar. Izuku turns, the arms latched around his neck easily disengaging.

"Pen Boy!" Pen Girl greets, leaning so close to Izuku that the edges of her chunky goggles brush the tips of his hair. "Team up with me!"

"Me?" Izuku asks dumbly.

"You're the one in first place, aren't you? Everyone's gonna be watching you, and I want everyone to watch me. So team up with me!" She leans back, finally giving Izuku enough space to breathe, pulling her goggles up to rest on top of her head. The strip of tape wrapped around her pen – pink, with yellow stars – is a flash of color along the side of the leather band.

She points a thumb at herself. "I'm Hatsume Mei, future CEO of Hatsume Industries, current support student!"

"Support student?" Izuku asks, feeling a bubble of infectious excitement. Of course Hatsume is a support student – the gear is a dead giveaway.

"Yep! I've got tons of super cute babies! There's something for everyone, and you can use whatever you'd like, as long as all those big companies in the stands will see. I don't know you, but you're in first place, and that's something I can use that to my advantage. It's free marketing! Let me join your team!"

"Me too!" a new voice calls. Aoyama Yuga strikes a pose, both arms in the air. After a lengthy pause, he lowers them, lacing his fingers beneath his chin and batting his eyelashes.

"You too?" Izuku asks, still taken aback by the first offer.

"Oui! Je m'appelle Aoyama Yuga." He bows with a small flourish. "I would not have made it this far without your help. I would like to return the favor! C'est bon?"

"You don't h-have to–"

"Non," Aoyama interrupts. He smiles, smaller than usual, but soft and grateful. "It's not a matter of obligation, mon amie. You were très gentil when I needed someone to be. My quirk… isn't the strongest, as you are unfortunately aware, but if you are willing to have me on

your team, it would be mon honneur."

The sincerity of the words brings tears to Izuku's eyes, but he smiles through them, nodding his head. There is a voice in the back of his head that questions whether he should accept such a sweet sentiment from someone who is only offering it because they don't have all the information. Afterall, Aoyama certainly wouldn't be calling Izuku kind if he knew all the things Izuku has done. But Izuku considers the urgency of needing a team, considers the cascading consequences of failing here, and buries the voice.

"Alright," Izuku says. "We'll want a f-fourth member if we can g-get one. Any id-deas?"

Hatsume shrugs cheerfully. "I don't know who any of these people are!"

Honestly, Izuku will take anyone they can get. Everyone who has made it this far is capable. Ideally, they'd gain some form of defense, maybe mobility, but realistically, Izuku doesn't have the luxury of choice. People will naturally want to team up with their friends, or at least their classmates – people they are familiar with. They won't want to take a gamble on Izuku. Izuku is surprised enough that two people are not only willing, but *eager*, to partner with him.

While he looks, Izuku can't help but take note of the groups forming around them. Todoroki and Katsuki were both swarmed the moment team building began, and while Katsuki still seems to be sorting through candidates, Todoroki has chosen his team with admirable efficiency.

Yaoyorozu, Iida, and Uraraka. A combination to watch out for, certainly. Todoroki and Yaoyorozu are both incredibly versatile combatants. Yaoyorozu tends to suffer under pressure, thankfully, but with Todoroki to cover her and buy her the time her quirk needs, they'll be formidable. Then Iida, who likely has the best mobility of all the contestants, which will only be increased by proper application of Uraraka's quirk. From what Izuku has seen, Todoroki is an intelligent and level-headed strategist and Yaoyorozu is capable of coming up with brilliant counters when she doesn't let her insecurity get the best of her. Iida is a rational and tactical thinker, though sometimes to a fault, and Uraraka is remarkably creative with her problem-solving.

And they certainly aren't the only group to watch out for. Tetsutetsu and Kendo are both gathering daunting teams of their own. Asui has

recruited Shoji and Izuku can already guess what she is planning – though if they do what he thinks they will, the foreknowledge won't make the strategy any less effective. And Katsuki might be taking longer, but Izuku is certain that's only because he's thinking through strategies to take best advantage of the abilities that are at his disposal. Katsuki doesn't settle for anything less than the best, and Izuku doubts that this will be any exception.

Aoyama scans the crowd for a moment himself, then snaps his fingers. "Tokoyami is still alone!"

"He is?" Izuku asks. He didn't see Tokoyami in any of the teams he was observing, but still assumed that someone would have snatched him up.

"Oui," Aoyama confirms, pointing to where Tokoyami stands, slightly apart from everyone, watching the situation progress. "He's always been a bit of a loner, non? I'll go ask him."

Aoyama skips away before Izuku can say anything, approaching Tokoyami with enviable ease. Izuku flushes and ducks his head when Aoyama points back to where he and Hatsume are waiting. He thinks about waving, something friendly and welcoming, but reconsiders halfway through the movement and ends up raising his hand only to drop it limply. Hatsume giggles and the heat spreading over Izuku's face intensifies. He stares resolutely at the ground, only looking back up when footsteps approach – two pairs, Izuku is equally pleased and embarrassed to note.

"I apologize if I am being too blunt," Tokoyami says in lieu of a greeting, "but given that time is working against us, I'll cut straight to the point. Your victory in the first round was impressive, but I am unfamiliar with you. How do you plan to secure another victory?"

Izuku blinks, processing the question. Then he nods. "This round isn't about victory. It's about survival. But I assure you we *will* be moving on to the next round."

Tokoyami cocks his head. "Are you a general education student?"

"Oh." Izuku's determined confidence ebbs away like a receding tide, and he suddenly can't keep eye contact. He grinds the toe of his shoe into the dirt, carving an arching line in front of him. "N-no. I'm not – I'm not, uh, in a cl-class. I'm… N-Ned-Nedzu's student, I g-guess."

"Nedzu!" Hatsume shouts. "You must be super smart or something

then, huh, Pen-kun?"

"It's I-Izuku," Izuku corrects weakly. "And I'm n-not – it's just, well. Or s-something, r-really."

Tokoyami stares for a long, intense moment, inscrutable even by his already-high standards. Dark Shadow coalesces over his shoulder, gripping at his collar with little clawed hands. She stares at Izuku as well, eyes like yellow lanterns in a thick purple-black mist. Izuku has never been this close to Tokoyami and Dark Shadow before, and she looks so much like Kurogiri that Izuku's chest feels like it is cracking open. She tugs at Tokoyami's collar. Tokoyami nods.

"What's your plan?" he asks. Izuku swallows and tears his eyes away from Dark Shadow.

"Hatsume–"

"Call me Mei!"

"I – uh, al-alright. What g-gear do you have?"

"Oh, I have lots of babies," she brags, hands on her hips. "What do you need?"

"M-mobility first."

"Well, I have my hover boots, obviously!" She lifts her leg and gestures to the mechanics there. "A propulsion-grappling system. And this!" She twists around to point at the device on her back. "I have lots of babies that are inspired by hero's quirks – with my own twist, of course!"

"Are you talking about Air Jet?" Izuku asks, studying the details of what he assumes is a jet pack. Hatsume – Mei – gasps and claps excitedly. She bends over slightly so Izuku can get a better look at the vents along the sides and bottom of the pack, bouncing on her heels.

"Yes! You know him?"

"Mhmm. I grew up near his agency. I w-went on a tour of it, once." He had been eight years old. His mother threatened to put him on a leash if he didn't stop running off whenever he saw something new that excited him. It feels like a different lifetime, at this point.

"I have lots more babies! Wanna see?"

“Do you have any weapons?”

Hatsume cackles. “I like the way you think, Pen Boy! *Of course* I have weapons! Any preferences?”

“A staff,” Izuku answers without hesitation. “I can make do with something else, but a staff is best for close range offense and defense, with the least risk of someone losing their head.”

“One staff coming right up!” Hatsume produces a large case from seemingly nowhere, slamming it onto the ground and sitting cross-legged in front of it. Izuku gets down on his knees with her. Tokoyami and Aoyama stay standing, but Dark Shadow stretches away from Tokoyami to peer curiously at the contents, looping around Izuku’s back. After a moment, she perches lightly in his hair.

“Dark Shadow,” Tokoyami scolds.

“She’s fine,” Izuku replies, distracted. Dark Shadow tugs at one of his curls, but Izuku hardly notices, even when Tokoyami clicks his tongue at her.

The case is full of marvels – several knives, some type of *gun,* and a handful of gadgets that Izuku can’t identify. Mei pulls a cylinder out of the case, about two fists long. She holds it to the side, presses a button. Displaced air whooshes as the staff rapidly extends, reaching its full length between one blink and the next.

“Tada!” Mei cries. “Staff!” She passes it to Izuku, and he weighs it in his hand. It is lighter than he would prefer, but considering how small it was in the case, it’s heavier than he would have expected. He spins it over his head, careful not to slam it into the ground or any of his companions as he gets a feel for the balance of it.

“Thank you, Mei,” he says, nodding to her. “It’s excellent. Now, what are these?” Careful not to touch, he points to a cluster of innocuous looking metal spheres, connected in groups of three by a thick knot of cabling. Mei pulls one out, holds it up, and presses another hidden button somewhere. With a hiss, cable unwinds from within the spheres, until they are dangling, one lower than the other two. Izuku grins.

“Bolas?” he asks.

“Not just any bolas! After you’ve gotten someone all tangled up in them, you can make them magnetic – no one’s untangling them, then!

And as an added bonus, you can make them electric! Knock them down and shock them into submission! Cute, right?"

Izuku laughs. "Super cute," he agrees. "And just what we need."

Mei nods. "I can link them to your staff. Then you can use the buttons there to control the effects! I wanted to make the staff a taser, but I was having issues with conductivity and durable."

"How do I contract the staff?"

"Press and hold the big button. White button is for electricity, black is for magnets"

It takes Izuku a moment to locate the button she's talking about, as inobtrusive as it is, flush with the metal and nearly the same steel grey, but once he finds it, the staff obediently compresses back into a small cylinder. It takes slightly longer for the staff to fold together than to expand, but not prohibitively long. Mei reaches out for it, and he passes it to her without question. He stands and brushes the dirt off his pants.

He looks to Mei, still sitting with her gadgets, hunched over the staff and the bolas. A light flashes between the devices and she grins up at him, enthusiasm and pride both well-earned. Aoyama picks up one of the other bolas from the case, turning it between his hands until he locates the button that extends the rope. He twirls them with surprising grace. Dark Shadow presses against Tokoyami's face, wrapping her arms around his head.

It's a very rag tag team. Mei just wants to show off. Aoyama and Tokoyami's quirks actively conflict with each other. Izuku himself has to carefully manage his own quirk use or risk public panic. None of them know each other, not really. They have little to no idea how to work together, and he suspects that none of them are accustomed to teamwork in general. Everyone will be gunning for them. It's a trial by fire.

But Izuku has to win the sports festival. And more than that, he can't be the reason *other* people fail. Necessity brings a special kind of determination, the kind that blurs into a steely confidence. When something needs to be done, you *do it*. The sports festival won't be the thing that stops him, not after he has come this far, not after all the things he has already done, not with all the things he has to make up for.

“Alright,” Izuku begins, “the plan. How attached are we to the 10,000,000 points?”

Chapter End Notes

Hitoshi: *sees Izuku alone*
Hitoshi: maybe… we could be… frie—
Mei: *appears*
Hitoshi: I’m Not Here To Make Friends.

Aoyama: *speaks French*
Tokoyami: *speaks emo*
Mei: I have no idea what you’re saying! :D

Katsuki (shaking hands) Tomura
Having rabies, probably

Next Chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part IV
Update: Mar 11

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part IV

Chapter Notes

> Hopefully this doesn't seem too rushed, but I'm still learning how to pace things properly – especially action, since I'm more of an introspection person, if you hadn't noticed
>
> Now, have some memes from the Discord!
> Cloud: X X X X X X
> Lena: X
> Nellie: X X X
>
> Also, last thing, I have an (unrealistic) ambition to someday illustrate the entirety of this story. I love illustrated fics so much and I love to draw, so in an ideal world, IGG would have an art piece or two for every part. Obviously that's a lot of work, especially on top of, you know, needing to write the story to begin with, but it's a project I have on the backburner, nonetheless. Have no idea how far I'll actually ever get with it, but here's what I did for chapter one!
> Izuku has his mother's quirk!
> Izuku has,,, Katsuki's quirk?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Considering that Fumikage is eternally bonded to a sentient being of darkness with the mentality and temperament of an energetic, rebellious, and occasionally somewhat malicious child, he often finds himself befuddled by the company he winds up keeping. Never has this been more true than now. Aoyama Yuga – who seems to script his every interaction to criteria of glamor and presentation, who would rather be perceived as shallow than as flawed. Hatsume Mei – who possesses a gleefully oblivious sadism that could rival Dark Shadow's, who already seems more than halfway consumed by the madness of her science, despite her young age. Midoriya Izuku, perhaps oddest of all – who stutters through introductions but speaks easily of weapons and strategy, who knows the details of each of his teammates' quirks without needing to ask what they are, who says nothing of his own quirk and seems relieved that no one asks, who is not affiliated with any course because he is not an official student, who attributes his status as Nedzu's personal student to "or something."

Fumikage can guess what that something may be.

But as odd as his unanticipated teammates unquestionably are, Fumikage himself is hardly an outlier. Few people have ever dared to call him normal, after all. More often, he hears “unnerving,” “disturbing,” or, most frequently, “creepy,” though he appreciates that moniker least of all. Who is Fumikage – as dubiously disturbing and undoubtably odd as he is – to judge someone on where darkness has led them? Here they find themselves, walking the same path. Why shun a man for where he has tread before when you can instead choose to walk side by side? Company is a valuable thing, and the ability to make any variety of strangers into companions is a valuable skill.

At the top of their formation, Midoriya’s determination whips around him like a war banner, eyes like venom and broken glass. Perhaps Fumikage should call him Izuku – that seems to be his preferred form of address, and far be it for Fumikage to disrespect those preferences, but the name seems far too informal when the boy looms with all the heavy presence of a harbinger. Dark Shadow feeds off it, swelling to a size she rarely reaches in the bright light of day, trembling with a heady excitement that brushes against Fumikage’s consciousness like a static charge.

“Are we ready?” Midoriya asks, solid as stone as the speakers around the arena crackle to life with Present Mic’s voice. Aoyama shouts back an affirmative. Hatsume giggles. Fumikage nods. Dark Shadow shrieks, dissonant and grating, like an entire murder taking flight. The display is enough to cause several of the nearby teams to cringe back, shoulders flinching towards their ears, but the hands holding Midoriya up all remain steady.

In the whisper of silence between the last beats of Present Mic’s countdown, Midoriya says, “I’m counting on you.”

Chaos descends in an instant. Fumikage’s instincts demand he withdraw; Dark Shadow’s battlelust demands she surge forward. Beneath their feet, the ground wavers, hard packed dirt suddenly slipping against itself in a sticky soup that swallows Fumikage up to the ankles in their mere moment of hesitation. Hatsume makes a noise of distaste as the electronics around her shoes are similarly consumed.

“Alright!” Tetsutetsu from class B yells.

Jirou takes advantage of the opening, lashing out with her jacks, aimed directly for Midoriya’s head. Dark Shadow bats her attack out of the air easily, cawing with mocking triumph as Jirou grits her teeth

and winces at the sound. As gleeful as she is, Dark Shadow pays no attention to the thin green tendril that whips away from one of Tetsutetsu's horses. Midoriya reels back as the vine whips towards his face, ducking halfway around it only for a thorn to snag on the fabric of his headband, unwinding it and tugging it away. Midoriya lunges in pursuit but is intercepted by an explosion, reeling backwards, yellow sparks reflected by wide eyes.

"Deku," Bakugou growls, snatching Midoriya's collar in a smoking fist. His canines flash in a snarl that seems to pass for a grin by Bakugou's standards. He lands – lands, because he has left his team shouting frantically ten feet away – crouched on Hatsume and Aoyama's shoulders. They both waver, shouting protests, but neither falls, even with his additional weight and the unstable ground working against them.

"Katsuki," Midoriya says, voice admirably level as he closes a hand around Bakugou's wrist. "We don't have what you're looking for." Bakugou's eyes, fixed for a moment on where Midoriya is touching him, dart to his forehead. The left side of his face twitches, a spasm that flickers, however briefly, through fear and doubt and panic where Fumikage has only ever see anger, irritation, and occasional boredom.

"Blink and you miss it!" Present Mic shouts, voice echoing through the stadium. "All it takes is a moment for the tables to turn in an event like this! Less than a minute in and already Team Midoriya, our front runner, has found themselves at the bottom of the pack while team Tetsutetsu has claimed the coveted 10,000,000 points!"

"Damn it! Couldn't even last a fucking minute. So fucking useless," Bakugou spits, tugging Midoriya closer to him, shaking him by the grip he has on his shirt. The ground swirls and solidifies beneath Fumikage's feet as team Tetsutetsu releases them and moves on, frantically attempting to put distance between themselves and all the teams whose ire they have gained.

"Are you surprised?" Midoriya asks mildly. "You won't win this fight by worrying about me, Katsuki." Bakugou's expression flickers again, too fast for Fumikage to read.

"Stay out of my way," he says, releasing Midoriya's collar after one last jerk. "The next time I see you I'm going to grind you to fucking dust, don't you forget it. Those 10,000,000 points were meant to be mine and I am going to damn well *get them*."

An explosion crackles between his fingers as he leans back, studying Midoriya with a shrewd stare that Midoriya meets impassively. Bakugou sneers, clicks his tongue, and for a moment Fumikage half expects that he will attack Midoriya again, more vehemently this time. In Fumikage's experience, Bakugou has always been undeterrable when he has a target within his sights – an intense tenacity, as much a weakness as it is a strength, but nevertheless intimidating to be on the wrong side of. But then he jumps backwards, spring boarding from Aoyama and Hatsume's shoulders with a small blast to propel him away. A second later, he is snagged about the waist by a length of Sero's tape.

"What the hell was that!?" Ashido demands the instant they have him in their grasp again. "You can't just blast off on your own! Is that even allowed?"

"It's fucking fine!" Bakugou shouts. "That's what I got Dollar Store Spider-Man for, don't fucking yell at me!"

"You're the one who's yelling!"

"As long as he doesn't touch the ground, it's allowed!" Midnight interjects. "It's a technicality, but we encourage those here!"

"See! Fine!"

"Uh, Bakubro?"

"What?!" Bakugou snaps.

"Where'd your headband go?"

Bakugou, hunched over to snarl more effectively at Ashido, straightens his spine. Slowly, he touches his forehead, running his fingers along the uncovered expanse of skin there that creases with the deepening furrow of his brows. His eyes, red as fire and fury lock unto Midoriya once more. Midoriya shakes the white strip of fabric out, then stretches it between his hands and ties it around his neck. He doesn't so much as glance over to Bakugou, who sits in an unnerving silence. The air around him seems to waver with heat and hatred, and Fumikage can't tear his own eyes away, looking between Bakugou and the nervous faces of his team.

"How the hell?" Bakugou asks, voice uncharacteristically quiet, enough so that it barely travels the distance between the two teams.

“I’m a thief, Kacchan,” Midoriya says, casual and weary. “It’s what I do.”

“I’m going to kill you.”

A shiver claws along Fumikage’s skin. He can feel the feathers on the crown of his head fluffing away his skin and he wills them to lay flat again. In the weeks they have been classmates, Fumikage has heard uncountable death threats from Bakugou Katsuki. Death threats are frequent and thoughtless interjections in Bakugou’s speech, and though he makes them routinely, they’re empty – nearly the equivalent of an “um” or “uh” in anyone else’s speech. Like those same little stutters, Fumikage’s brain has begun to filter out Bakugou’s exclamations of “die!” and “I’ll kill you,” as if they are just meaningless sounds to fill the gaps between the words that matter.

Fumikage doesn’t know if Bakugou is capable of murder. Violence, certainly, but violence is going to be their profession. People will die along the way, and at some point, they will likely even be the ones to kill them – that is nearly inevitable for any hero who isn’t exclusively involved in rescue and whose career spans more than a couple of years. But actual murder – the cold-blooded kind where you deliberately deprive the world of a person and a person of the world – Fumikage assumes that most people are not actually capable of that.

For the first time, Bakugou’s threat settles heavily in the air – *heavily*, weighty, not empty or hollow at all. And for the first time, Fumikage wonders how much Bakugou means it. Dark Shadow hisses, twisting around until she is between Bakugou and Midoriya, flattening herself out like some great shield. Midoriya’s mouth quirks up, the shape of a smile with none of the substance.

“It’s fine,” he tells her, quelling until she recedes enough that he can make eye contact with Bakugou. “You can kill me,” he says, as if unaffected by the words or the thought, “or you can win. You can beat me, or you can beat everyone. It’s your choice.”

There is a loud bang from one of the other teams. Bakugou’s teammates look nervously between their rider and the commotion surrounding the 10,000,000 points. Bakugou’s shoulders heave with his breath. Midoriya waits, silent and patient. Fumikage suddenly doubts that Midoriya actually knows what he is doing, provoking Bakugou like this. Dark Shadow bristles, the edges of her form sharpening into spikes that pulse slightly with her agitation.

“What the hell happened to you, Deku?”

Midoriya blinks. His composure, the perfectly pleasant counterpoint to Bakugou’s senseless rage, crumbles into surprised confusion.

When Midoriya declared he would lead their team to the next round, something settled over him – a kind of sharp brightness, an immovable determination possessed only by the very competent or the very desperate. Competence and desperation both are forces to be wary of on the battlefield, and Fumikage determined in that moment that he would rather fight with Midoriya than against him.

Fumikage stands by that decision now more than ever. Gone is the toxic brightness, the shattered sharpness of Midoriya’s eyes. That was frightful in its own right, but Fumikage is familiar with such looks, sees them in the eyes of nearly all his classmates in the heat of training. He has never seen a look like this. Now, Midoriya’s eyes have gone dim and dark. Like an algal bloom. A mossy film, hiding dead things at unknown depths, choked of light and oxygen.

“Do you really want to know?” Midoriya asks. “I’ll tell you, if you’ll listen.”

Bakugou does not respond, though his silence speaks more than the majority of the nonsense he shouts. He stares, the fire of his eyes tempered by calculative assessment. Sero says something Fumikage can’t hear and Bakugou tears his glare away from Midoriya, nods sharply.

“Let’s get our damn points,” he says, to the visible relief of his team. He pointedly does not look back at Midoriya as they go.

“Go fetch!” Hatsume calls after them, cackling to herself.

Midoriya sighs, abruptly going slack above them as he releases tension Fumikage hadn’t noticed gather. “See?” he asks. He smiles, a wobbly quirk of his lips that doesn’t meet his eyes, but at least they no longer look like a graveyard. “Just like I said.”

Somehow, the plan has gone off perfectly. The were captured at the beginning – Midoriya had even named Honenuki Juzo specifically among the ones who would be most likely to immobilize them. Team Tetsutetsu has the 10,000,000 points – one of the teams most well suited for keeping Bakugou occupied as long as possible. Midoriya has stolen Bakugou’s own points, giving them a decent amount to work with and build on to ensure their placement in the final round. And,

most astounding of all, Bakugou has chosen to ignore them, at least for the time being.

Perhaps Midoriya's quirk involves some degree of foresight. Fumikage adds the possibility onto the end of what is turning out to be a very long list of ways in which Midoriya is both terrifying and admirable.

He's odd, Dark Shadow thinks to Fumikage as Midoriya directs them onwards. *I like him.*

You would, Fumikage thinks in return.

You do, too. We should keep him.

You can't just keep people.

I keep you, *don't I?*

Fumikage sighs. Yes, he truly does surround himself with some very odd company. He has done so since he was young, when Dark Shadow first manifested like a warm smudge of cotton along the edges of his consciousness, crying out her loneliness like a discordant melody that Fumikage could not shut off. Dark Shadow is odd, indeed. As are Aoyama and Hatsume and Midoriya, most of all. Then again, as is Fumikage. It's as they say – birds of a feather flock together.

"Man," Hizashi groans, leaning back in his chair, "there go the 10,000,000 points. I was kinda hoping the green bean would sweep the entire thing."

"You're supposed to be unbiased," Shouta replies, distracted as his eyes trace through the chaos in the arena. Bakugou throws himself at Tetsutetsu for the second time, screaming something inaudible when his explosions are easily negated.

"No, I only have to *pretend* to be unbiased when the mic is on! Don't pretend you don't want him to win."

"No one is going to win until the final round. Getting rid of the points was a smart move. He kept his team in second place while he did it, too. It's a logical strategy."

Hizashi leans against the desk, pouting for a moment. Then he scootches forwards, leaning closer to Shouta as the pout morphs into an insufferable smirk in the corner of Shouta's vision.

"Logical, huh?" Hizashi asks, in that pseudo-innocent tone Shouta has never once fallen for.

"It was," Shouta confirms flatly.

"You could just say you're proud of him."

"I'm not proud of him," Shouta denies immediately. "He blew himself up less than half an hour ago. Which was reckless and unnecessary and not logical in the slightest."

"Aww," Hizashi coos. "So you were worried about him and now you're proud. It's okay babe, you don't need to say it. I speak your language."

Shouta very much wants to wipe the shit-eating grin off Hizashi's face. But at the same time, he can't exactly deny the truth to his husband's words. Well, he can and will deny them, and he will probably fool just about everyone *except* Hizashi, who, unfortunately, really does speak Shouta's language. Sometimes unnervingly so, to the extent that Shouta doesn't even realizes the associations he has made until Hizashi cracks the code.

He *was* worried about Izuku. Ridiculous, considering that the kid can more than take care of himself and in fact *has been* to some degree for years. And he *is* proud of Izuku. Equally ridiculous, considering the festival is far from over and the kid has already *blown himself up*, which certainly isn't behavior worthy of Shouta's pride.

Shouta, absolutely unwilling to admit either of these things, grunts. "Don't call me babe."

"Sorry, Kitten. Better?"

"Don't you have an event to be commentating?"

Hizashi scrunches up his nose, turning back to the wide window that overlooks the arena, screens scattered around to give better views of specific areas of action. A harried-looking team Tetsutetsu continues fending off Bakugou's assault. Much like he did to team Midoriya, Bakugou has launched himself at them bodily, leaving his teammates behind, floundering in a soft muck of quicksand. Shiozaki's vines have

left small scratches along Bakugou's arms, but he persists in his attacks with a single-minded determination.

"What am I meant to say?" Hizashi asks. "It's madness down there."

"It's your job."

"You're here, too. I don't see you bestowing any insights onto the people."

"Only the last five minutes really matter."

Hizashi rolls his eyes, rocking his entire head with the gesture. "That's what I thought. You don't know what to say, either."

There's simply too much happening on the field, Hizashi is right. There is, of course, the flash of Bakugou's never-ending onslaught against team Tetsutetsu. Todoroki's team is under heavy attack as well, several of the lower-ranked teams try to hedge their bets on the fourth-place headband, rather than enter the fray for the 10,000,000. Team Shinsou, headed by the single gen ed student to make it to the second round, is picking off small point values, slowly but surely building up a worthwhile total without drawing any attention at all.

And team Midoriya – Shouta keeps finding his eyes fixed on Izuku when he should be watching the event more generally. Now that Izuku is no longer pulling the invisibility stunt of the first round, Shouta's attention is drawn to him like a magnet, and Shouta is unsure if that's a sign of his own bias or if it's simply a quality of Izuku's, if eyes all over the country are latching onto him in a similar way.

While Bakugou is occupied, team Midoriya comes head-to-head with team Hagakure, who seem to have abandoned their pursuit of the 10,000,000 points after Bakugou got involved. Hizashi taps his hands excitedly against the desk as Jirou attempts a ranged attack.

"1000 yen says Greenbean destroys them," he says.

Shouta scoffs, unimpressed. "I'm not betting on our students."

"You're right," Hizashi agrees. "Only an idiot would take that bet. 1000 yen says Todoroki ends up with the 10,000,000."

As Jirou's attack is intercepted by Dark Shadow, just as it was at the beginning of the battle, Shouta glances between Bakugou – still doggedly attempting to steal the 10,000,000 from Tetsutetsu – and

Todoroki – making his way across the field to where Bakugou and Tetsutetsu are fighting, but skirmishing with other teams regularly along the way.

“You’ve got yourself a bet,” Shouta agrees.

On the field, Dark Shadow takes visible glee in batting Jirou’s repeated attacks out of the air. With Sato supporting Hagakure and no animals in the arena, Jirou is the team’s only offensive power, a realization that seems to come to the team members themselves a moment too late. They seem to consult each other briefly before attempting to disengage, but Hatsume Mei – and Shouta doesn’t want to think too hard about Maijima’s problem child teaming up with his own – passes something to Aoyama. There is a blur of motion as he spins it in his hand, and then Sato stumbles as weights and wires tangle around his lower legs. He tips to the side, crashing into Koda as he tries and fails to regain his footing, both boys tumbling to the ground. Suddenly supporting Hagakure on her own, Jirou wobbles, trying to widen her stance to accommodate for the weight, but Hagakure ends up tipping over backwards, falling into a heap with the boys, who both turn violent shades of red. Jirou, the only one left standing, looks back to her crumpled team and rubs a hand over her face. Hatsume bounces on her heels, enough that she jostles Izuku, who looks back at her with a grin as Dark Shadow stabilizes him.

“Oh!” Hizashi exclaims. “I can commentate about this! I have stuff to say, I have stuff to say!” He scrabbles around the desk for the button that turns their microphones live. As Zashi practically flings himself over his lap, Shouta wonders, not for the first time, why they put the button on his side of the desk when he didn’t have working arms to press it.

“Looks like team Hagakure is down for the count!” Hizashi shouts when the system is online. “Let this be a lesson to you: always stay on your support technician’s good side! Team Hagakure can pick themselves up and get back in the game, but their points are forfeit to the team that knocked them down – team Midoriya! The bigger they are, the harder they fall, folks!” He leans back from the mic, turning to Shouta with raised eyebrows. “Anything to add, Eraser, or are you still waiting for the last five minutes?”

Shouta hums. “Never underestimate the value of good support gear. In a real fight, it’s tools like that that often make the difference between a victory and a loss. They’re an especially unique advantage here, and team Midoriya is wise to leverage that.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself!”

Hizashi switches the mics back off. He props his head in his hand, grinning at Shouta who stares pointedly at the action below them. Hizashi bats his eyes, wiggles his eyebrows.

“Shut up,” Shouta grunts.

“Hey, I didn’t say anything. *You* did, though. About how Izuku is so *wise* to *leverage* his *advantages.*”

Shouta sighs, ignoring the slight throb that has started between his eyes. “It was commentary. I’m supposed to be commentating.”

“Mhmm. Proud dad is a good look on you.”

“I’m – We’re not his *dads*, Hizashi, god.” Hizashi cackles, grabbing Shouta’s chair by the arm to pull him closer and press an obnoxious kiss to his temple. Shouta shoves his elbow into Hizashi’s chair, sending the nuisance wheeling a few inches away.

“Do your job,” he orders.

“It’s not like we’re missing anything,” Hizashi says as he fixes the positions of their chairs. “Only the last five minutes really matter, you said it yourself. They’re just chasing each other around, same as – oh shit, is Izuku going after Bakugou?”

“What?” Shouta asks, attention snapping back to the field. “No, Bakugou doesn’t even have anything to go after, he wouldn’t be that stupid.” He recalls, vividly, the events of less than an hour ago. “Damn it, I swear to god if that kid blows himself up *again*, I’m going to ground him for life.”

“Such a dad.”

“I am *not* his dad,” Shouta repeats, though he is too distracted to inject as much force into the words as he probably should.

In the chaos of the arena, Izuku’s team is, sure enough, heading back in Bakugou’s direction. Five minutes in and Bakugou is still railing against team Tetsutetsu. Shouta suspects that Awase must have Welded the 10,000,000 to Tetsutetsu, given that they still have the points despite looking noticeably worse for wear. They’ll likely reach their breaking point before the halfway mark.

Both teams are caught up in each other, enough so that they don't notice team Midoriya's approach. It's Shiozaki who spots the small tendril of darkness that Dark Shadow sneaks around the knot of Tetsutetsu's headband. Not the 10,000,000 – it's the 705 that they started with, and Dark Shadow snatches it away in an instant, racing back to Tokoyami. Any retaliation team Tetsutetsu may have had in mind is quickly dashed by the continued assault of Bakugou. Bakugou himself spares Izuku a feral sneer but is otherwise too consumed by his goal to abandon it in favor of acting on the grudge he bears for Izuku. In a single, simple maneuver, team Midoriya has gained the second most valuable headband on the field.

Hizashi whistles. "That was ballsy."

Shouta leans his head against the back of his chair, closing his eyes. The headache that has been simmering throughout the course of the sports festival suddenly escalates to a boil, pressing viciously against the insides of his skull. Ballsy is not the word Shouta would use to describe what just happened. He would use two – carefully orchestrated.

Izuku knew both teams would be too preoccupied to prevent or reverse the theft. And they were preoccupied because *Izuku* was the one who set them against each other to begin with. It's either one hell of a happy coincidence or Izuku did it all deliberately, planned it out and followed through with a frightening amount of foresight. The rat is going to end up with all sorts of dreadful ideas after watching these recordings, Shouta is sure.

"This kid is going to put me in an early grave," he announces.

"You see," Hizashi says, too cheerful for the seriousness of Shouta's statement, "that sounds exactly like something a dad would say."

Shouta closes his eyes and doesn't dignify that with a response. He considers going to sleep. If he is lucky, maybe he will be able to sleep through the entire festival, and Hizashi will only wake him up to tell him that Izuku has destroyed his competition so absolutely that he has gotten not only first place, but second and third as well. If he is especially lucky, perhaps Hizashi will be kind enough to let him sleep through whatever Izuku-based plan for world domination Nedzu is sure to try to enact after seeing this.

"Sho," Hizashi says, shaking his shoulder only a couple of minutes later. "You're gonna want to watch this." It has not been nearly long

enough for everything to be over with. Of course not, Zashi never lets Shouta rest – he takes too much sadistic satisfaction in Shouta's exhausted suffering.

Shouta cracks an eye open, only to close it immediately.

"Todoroki?" he asks, feeling twice his age.

"Seems like it." Hizashi nearly manages to sound sympathetic, but the undercurrent of laughter in his voice gives him away. "It'll be a good fight. And hey, if Izuku keeps Todoroki occupied, you'll be winning that 1000 yen!"

"We're married. Our bank accounts are connected."

"Bragging rights!"

Shouta groans, forcing himself to sit up and face what's happening in the arena. The ground is already iced over, though none of Izuku's teammates have been caught in it. Todoroki faces team Midoriya with the same grim determination he always wears. Izuku, staff extended in front of him, meets the look with a grin that takes years off Shouta's life.

The large clock counting down the remaining battle time for those in the stadium reads 5:36. It always comes down to the last five minutes.

Ochako might be a little afraid of Todoroki Shouto.

Not *afraid* afraid, of course. He's only a first-year hero student, just like Ochako, so it would be silly to be *afraid* afraid of him, but she's just… a little afraid, yeah. He's doesn't seem like he's mean or a bad person or anything. It's just that he's super strong, right? Ochako is in the hero course, and she likes to think that she deserves to be there just as much as everyone else because she works hard, but she can't even *imagine* being as strong as Todoroki is. He has all that strength, and it seems almost *trivial* to him. And he doesn't really talk much to anyone outside what is necessary for team exercises, and he's also super attractive. Not that Ochako cares about stuff like that, but she has *eyes*, and it's just another *thing* on top of all the other *things* about Todoroki that make him – well, a little bit scary.

She's not the only one who thinks that, either. Most people don't say anything about it, because that would be pretty rude, but today especially, it's written across peoples' faces when their teams come head-to-head. She can see it on Aoyama's face now, a thread of nervousness that winds around behind his eyes.

"Todoroki," Yaoyorozu says tentatively. "There's only five minutes left. If we're going to get the 10,000,000, we can't keep getting distracted."

"This won't take long." Todoroki's reply is simply stated, devoid of arrogance. Which is also a little scary, to know that Todoroki lives in a world where victory is all but assured.

Across from them, the other team's rider – Midoriya, the one who started with the 10,000,000 points – grins in a way that reminds Ochako a bit of Bakugou. She had seen Midoriya before the second round started, and she recognized him then. Last week, she had met him briefly. He'd seemed sweet, if a bit nervous. If she hadn't seen him between events, if this was her first time catching sight of him today, she doesn't think she would have connected this boy to stuttering one she met outside the training field. This boy seems just as intense as Todoroki, and he doesn't seem scared in the slightest.

"Iida," Todoroki says. The name is like an order.

Obligingly, Iida bends his knees slightly and Ochako braces herself as well as she can in the split second she has before he starts running. Iida is fast, and with Ochako's quirk preventing him from being weighed down, he can propel all four of them forward at his full speed. It always leaves Ochako dizzy and disoriented for a moment when they stop, and she has no idea how Todoroki handles it so well, but they've stolen several headbands with this same method. The strategy works just as well this time as it has all the others. When Iida stops, Todoroki is holding one of team Midoriya's bands.

"Now for the 10,000,000," he says, tying the new band around his neck to rest with the others. Without looking back, he sends a wave of ice towards team Midoriya. He did the same thing when their paths first crossed but failed to catch any of them in the attack. This time, Aoyama's right foot is caught up to the ankle, and he says something in French that Ochako would be is a curse word.

Todoroki directs their team towards Bakugou, who has claimed to 10,000,000 points and is defending it as explosively and viciously as

he does everything. Ochako has to admit that she's not particularly looking forward to trying to take the points from him.

Bakugou is loud and aggressive, and he's just as scary as Todoroki is, if in an entirely different way that involves far more yelling and far fewer glacial stares. He's definitely a dangerous opponent – Ochako had learned that the hard way, on their very first day of hero training. Her embarrassing defeat in that exercise was like a cold bucket of water waking her up to what being a hero student was actually going to be like.

Everything at UA happens quickly. Bakugou knocked her unconscious so fast she couldn't say exactly how it happened when she woke up. Villains invaded the USJ in seconds and nearly killed several people in less than half an hour. Midoriya Izuku blew himself up in round one and took first place when no one even knew who he was. Iida runs so quickly that the world blurs as Ochako is dragged along.

As a heroics student Ochako has gotten used to whiplash. The sickening lurch of a change that happens so abruptly you don't even get a moment to think about what it means.

Like whiplash, the first thing Ochako registers is a pain in her neck. Yaoyorozu yelps and Todoroki twists around, eyes going wide as Midoriya – where did Midoriya come from? Ochako and Yaoyorozu both stumble. At the head of their formation, Iida continues another two steps forward, tugging uncomfortably at Ochako's arm for a moment before he is forced to come to a stop.

"Sorry," Midoriya says, grimacing down first at Yaoyorozu, then at Ochako herself. The rough tread of his bright red sneakers digs into Ochako's shoulder through her shirt. He reaches out, grabbing the tail of the band wrapped around Todoroki's head, pulling it free with one easy tug. Todoroki's eyes latch on the trailing end of it. His mouth is slack with shock, an expression Ochako never could have pictured him wearing before this moment.

As Midoriya pulls back, Todoroki leans forward, reaching after the stolen points with ice crackling up his arm. Midoriya deflects the grab, diverting it to the side with the same trivial ease Ochako sees in Todoroki as he freezes entire buildings or building-high robots. The staff Midoriya was holding earlier suddenly appears in his other hand, though Ochako could have sworn that he didn't have it a moment ago. Todoroki grabs the end of the it, but Midoriya twists it out of his grip, and, in a flash of gunmetal grey, cracks it against the side of

Todoroki's head.

"Todoroki!" Yaoyorozu shouts as he lulls to the side, blinking rapidly. He doesn't fall, braced up by the staff that Midoriya stretches out to catch him.

Pressing his right hand to his head, Todoroki makes another grab for the weapon, but it disappears beneath his fingers, contracting into a tiny cylinder that Midoriya pulls out of reach. Holding it behind him, he extends it again, slamming the end into the ground, using it to vault up, twisting around in midair until he is facing back toward his team. A sharp burst of air stirs Ochako's hair around her face as thin wires jump out of the device on his back.

She saw that strange girl with the pink dreadlocks use this trick to cross the chasm during the obstacle course, grappling between the stone pillars with the help of her hover boots and jetpack. Midoriya has the jetpack, but he doesn't have the boots, and more importantly, he doesn't have anything for the hooks to anchor him to. They shoot out into empty air, and Ochako is certain that he is going to crash to the ground.

Several things happen in an instant – all at once and too quick to keep proper track of, the way everything happens at UA, and all Ochako can do is watch as the people who thinker faster than her move into action.

First, Todoroki, expression changed from slack to furious, clamors around, forcing Ochako, Yaoyorozu, and Iida to frantically adjust their balance to keep them from toppling over. Todoroki stretches out, shoulder, arm, fingers, all fully extended as he tries to close the gap Midoriya has put between them, but he can't reach, not without sending them all to the ground. And then a sharp light glints across his eyes as flame curls up his arm and into his hair, dancing between his fingers and arching out into the air, flowing in graceful arcs and jagged points like something free and hungry. Ochako flinches slightly away from the heat, hair fluttering in the breeze the flames kick up and sticking to the sweat that suddenly beads on her neck.

Simultaneously, Dark Shadow charges into the sky. They snag the grappling cables out of the air, yanking Midoriya back to his team. Todoroki's fire licks at Midoriya's heels, and Ochako waits for it to catch on the hem of his pants, but it spirals up around his legs without touching him, shooting into the air above his head where it loops around itself until it forms a little ball with chaotic edges. Todoroki's

flames gutter out, dying to embers that flicker along the charred edges of his sleeve.

Midoriya's team catches him, Aoyama and the support course girl both shouting gleefully as he ties the stolen band around his neck. The flames above him stretch, floating down to rest around his head and shoulders. They waver there for a moment, tracing eddies in the air, then dissipate in a flurry of sparks.

"Fire!" the support girl yells. "I could make you so many babies! Can you create it or only manipulate it? Do you want a flamethrower?!"

Midoriya glances down to her for a moment, offering a hesitant smile before fixing his eyes back on Todoroki. "I can breathe it," he answers.

Todoroki inhales sharply. "Change of plans," he says, twisting around on the platform of their arms so he is facing the right direction again. His hands are shaking. Ochako bites her lip. "We don't need the 10,000,000."

"Todoroki…" Yaoyorozu says weakly, trailing off

"Iida. How fast can you run?"

"I can go faster," Iida admits after a moment of watching team Midoriya. "But I can only do it once, and I'm afraid that I won't be of much use afterwards."

And Todoroki, as terrifying as he is, only says, "Do it."

Chapter End Notes

> Izuku and Bakugou: *have a whole ass conversation in the middle of the cavalry battle*
> Team Bakugou: Can we get some points? Can we PLEASE get some points??
>
> Mic: You're such a dad.
> Aizawa: I'm not a dad!
> Izuku: Dad?
> Aizawa: Yeah, kid?
> Mic: Don't ever lie to my face again.
>
> Tokoyami: Midoriya can see the future
> Hitoshi, Aoyama & Mei: NO

Uraraka: Midoriya's quirk is Pyrokinesis!
Aoyama & Mei: *visible confusion*

Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part V
Update: Mar 18 or Mar 25
(*Might* take a week off to review the relevant episodes of the anime. There's a lot of upcoming scenes I need to get reference for, but I don't know how long that will take me)

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part V

Chapter Notes

> Well, it's been a nice five chapters, but CWs in endnotes. Izuku has a bit of a mental health relapse this chapter.
>
> *rubs my little gremlin hands together* hehehehe
> This chapter has some stuff I've been looking forward to getting to for a while, on top of setting up for some future stuff that I'm looking forward to just as much!! I feel so devious
>
> Discord memes!
> Cloud: X X X X X X X
> Rhino: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Iida Tenya has very clear tells. Izuku imagines that it's not something the other boy generally has to worry about, given that he moves so quickly. Even if his opponents receive a moment of forewarning, Iida is still too fast for most people to dodge or counter.

Izuku is not most people.

"Aoyama," he says the moment he sees the slight bending of Iida's knees. Aoyama doesn't ask questions, doesn't even waste time with a reply. Dark Shadow keeps Izuku stably propped up from below as Aoyama partially breaks their formation, spinning a bola out to the side. Time seems to slow to a crawl as Izuku activates Bullet Time, analyzing the minute way Iida's stance widens, the way his heels dig into the ground to gain traction.

"Now," Izuku shouts the instant a warm orange glow flares within Iida's exhausts. With time moving like cold honey, sluggish and viscous, the gap between Izuku's order and Aoyama's response seems to drag on. Iida has already launched himself forward, dragging his team with him, and he has nearly halved the distance between them, but Izuku watches the bola fly, rotating around itself. One of the cables strikes Iida in the leg. The weights continue forward before their momentum yanks them back, looping around Iida's ankles.

Iida's face doesn't change, his head tilted slightly down, brow heavy and mouth firm as he focuses on his target, not yet aware of what has happened. Todoroki, though – his eyes narrow the moment Izuku

shouts his command to Aoyama. When both of Iida's feet leave the ground, knotted together by a tangle of wire, ice is already rising up beneath him, catching him up to the waist, spreading backwards to grab Uraraka and Yaoyorozu before they can begin to lose their balance as well.

It's an impressive display of reflexes and instincts, and it ultimately serves Izuku's purposes as well as the bola itself would have. Surrounded by ice, team Todoroki is as effectively halted as they would have been if they had collapsed altogether. Izuku can't claim their points, but Izuku also doesn't need them. As long as they keep the points they have, they're guaranteed to progress to the next round, and that's the promise Izuku made to Aoyama, Mei, Tokoyami, and Dark Shadow.

A buzzer sounds, echoing through the arena over the squall of voices and quirks. Izuku sags, laughing under his breath as relief and exhaustion chase circles around each other in his head. Todoroki stares as if he is trying to burn a hole through Izuku, but Izuku does his best to ignore it, smiling at his teammates as Dark Shadow grabs him by the arm to help him get back to the ground.

"Melt it!" Mei demands, wrapping her hands around Izuku's other arm as soon as he is within easy reach. She points eagerly over to team Todoroki, where Yaoyorozu has produced some kind of scraper that she is using to chip at the ice around her ankles when Todoroki himself failed to immediately release them.

"I, uh, don't think that's a great i-idea," Izuku says apologetically, looking away from the other team before he can accidentally make eye contact with Todoroki. "I make *f-fire,* not heat, and I don't want to b-burn anyone. T-Todor-r-roki can m-melt his own ice, I th-think."

There is an itching compulsion to look at Aoyama. *I have a healing quirk,* Izuku had told him. After all his careful planning, his thoughtful strategy, he had made such a stupid mistake. He had known from the beginning that he would have to use a visible quirk at some point – he had a list of viable options in his head, though he had been waiting for a relevant situation to settle on one. None of them were *healing quirks*, that was never part of the plan.

And now Aoyama knows. Likely, he doesn't know *what* he knows, but he must know that *something* is off. He knows that Izuku healed him in the first round and then manipulated fire in the second, two fundamentally unrelated abilities. At best, Aoyama is confused, maybe

curious. At worst he is disgusted, horrified, *enraged*.

Izuku avoids Aoyama's eyes avidly as Todoroki's.

Mei pouts. "But you can breathe fire. You can't just tell me you can breathe fire and *not* breathe fire!"

"D-Dark Shadow doesn't like fire," Izuku says, only partially an excuse as she shudders in agreement with his words. Dark Shadow can function in light, obviously, but she has a notable preference for darkness, and she had shrunk away in discomfort before Izuku had dispersed the flames he had collected from Todoroki. Mei looks at Dark Shadow for a moment before dragging Izuku three steps away and turning them so their backs are to the rest of their group.

"Don't follow them," Izuku hears Tokoyami sigh. Dark Shadow grumbles, a wordless tangle of static.

Mei flings an arm around Izuku's shoulders, dragging him down so their heads are close together, huddled around the space in front of them. She pulls her goggles back down over her eyes.

"Do it," she says.

"Your hair," he replies, looking doubtfully at one of the pink locks that spills over the band of her headgear.

She shakes him. "It's been on fire before! Do it!"

Izuku sighs, triggering a sharp click at the base of his throat. His breath comes out as little wisps of flame, round plumes that die out only a few inches from his mouth. He carefully directs the fire, as small as it is, away from Mei's face and hair, but after only a second, she makes that job much harder by bouncing in place. He cuts the flame off before the situation can escalate.

Mei gasps excitedly. "Does it burn your throat?" she asks. "Your skin? How big a fire can you make? How big a fire can you *control?* Can you control the temperature at all? How hot *is* it? How–"

The speakers around the stadium crackle, cutting Mei off, but Izuku stores all her questions in the back of his mind as things he'll have to take time to answer when the festival is over. If everything goes as planned, Izuku will be joining class 1-A soon, and he'll need gear when he does. Tentatively, Izuku imagines a future that involves plenty of hours spent in the support studio, collaborating on costume

and gear ideas, support tech for *him*. Mei would be a good person to work with – a genius whose passion for her craft eclipsed all other concerns, potentially including issues like who Izuku is and what he has done in the past, information that could very likely dissuade any number of others from working with him.

Izuku and Mei rejoin Aoyama, Tokoyami, and Dark Shadow. Todoroki has freed his team of the ice and is standing in a loose circle with them, facing away from Izuku in a way that feels intentional. The cold aura around him seems stronger now, like he is trying to freeze away any warmth left behind from the flames he briefly let burn. Izuku stares at the rigid lines of Todoroki's shoulders, insides aching like a bruise. Cold like this is a familiar phantom to Izuku; he knows the way it settles in your bones like something ancient and immovable, so all-encompassing that the smallest touch of warmth hurts. Izuku himself is only just now beginning to thaw for the first time in years. He wonders how long Todoroki has been frozen, wonders what it will take for the other boy to begin to melt.

Izuku tears his eyes away from Todoroki, tells himself it's another issue to be dealt with later as Present Mic begins announcing the final results of the battle. After engaging with team Tetsutetsu for nearly the entirety of the match, team Bakugou claims first place with the 10,000,000. Izuku's own team has secured second, followed by team Todoroki in third, and team Shinsou in fourth.

Fourth place was always the most likely wildcard when Izuku tried to predict the outcome of the event. Team Shinsou is not who Izuku would have guessed, though he wouldn't have ruled them out, either. He finds Shinsou Hitoshi in the crowd, standing apart from everyone with his hands in his pockets and a bored look on his face. His teammates murmur to each other, faces creased with confusion.

"You certainly did not let us down, *mon amie*," Aoyama says, grinning coyly as he ducks in front of Izuku.

Izuku shakes his head, waving his hands through the air. "I b-barely did anything," he denies. "I wouldn't have gotten a-anywhere without you all."

"Modest, too." Aoyama laughs behind his hand. If he has been affected by Izuku's display during the battle, he does well hiding it.

"You sell yourself too short," Tokoyami says, Dark Shadow nodding in vigorous support. "Your skill with strategy and prediction was a sight

to behold."

"Not to mention the way you totally handed it to Candycane and Co!" Mei adds. "That was all you. And my babies, of course!"

"It was a t-team effort," Izuku says, ducking his chin down against his chest.

Tokoyami nods once, controlled, and decisive, a sharp contrast to Dark Shadow's energetic head bobbing. "Precisely. A team effort – your own efforts included."

Izuku swallows, closing his eyes to soothe the burn welling up behind them. There weren't quite words for how lucky Izuku feels in this moment. And it really is all luck – this beautiful thing that he has done absolutely nothing to earn. He has no idea how these people can stand to be so kind to him. Maybe Mei he could understand, but Aoyama and Tokoyami both have reasons to be suspicious of him, even before Izuku's slip up with his quirk use. Izuku knows Eraser warned class 1-A that he would be here, a villain from the USJ attack. His name wasn't made public, but how many other people were participating in the sports festival who weren't part of one of the classes? None. Izuku is the only one, the only one who has ever been given this chance, this chance that no one can be sure quite yet that he deserves.

"Are you crying, Pen-kun?"

"No," Izuku denies. His voice cracks.

"It's okay if you are," Mei assures him.

As if taking her words as permission, the tears brim over, spilling down his cheeks even while he carefully keeps his breathing in check. For the second time today, Izuku is crying on national television, embarrassment adding to the red splotchiness of his face.

"Wow," Mei says. "You're kind of an ugly crier, huh?"

"Hatsume!" Tokoyami barks.

"Call me Mei!"

"She's not entirely wrong," Aoyama offers, voice slightly choked and cheeks puffed up as he muffles laughter. Dark Shadow doesn't bother, snickering unrepentantly to herself, even when Tokoyami tugs sharply

at the strand of shadow that tethers her to his torso.

Izuku's own laugh catches him by surprise. It bubbles up his throat, wet from the tears but still sincere. Everyone always says that UA students are insane; it's practically a running joke throughout the country. And they're right. They're all right – these kids are crazy.

"S-sorry," he stutters through the giggles.

"Don't apologize," Aoyama says. "Your laugh is much nicer than the crying face." He winks. "Now, I believe it's time for lunch. We could all go *ensemble*, if you'd like?"

Mei shrugs. "I don't know what that means!"

"Together," Izuku tells her, a smile rising around the syllables.

"*Ensemble!"* she shouts, pointing forward with a bright grin. Aoyama laughs at her pronunciation, and Izuku finds himself laughing as well, the energy infectious, but he frowns a moment later.

"I – uh. I can't," he remembers. "S-sorry. I would, but–" he swallows painfully. All four of his teammates, Dark Shadow included, are looking at him curiously, still smiling and kind as he fidgets under their eyes. He can say no, say he can't and leave it at that. They won't be mad, they won't press. Or, he can –

"I'm s-s-supposed to st-stay with Er-raserh-head," he admits softly, staring at the ground. "B-bet-tween ev-vents. I'm n-no sup-posed to g-go off on my o-own."

"That sucks!" Mei groans. "Sometimes Maijima-Sensei does that to me. 'No Mei,'" she mimics, "'you can't come into the lab on Sunday, you can't be around power tools without supervision, no, not even during lunchbreaks,' pah!" She sticks her tongue out.

Izuku glances quickly to Aoyama and Tokoyami. Mei doesn't understand what he's saying, she doesn't get what he *means*, but surely Aoyama and Tokoyami will make the connection now if they hadn't already.

Aoyama smiles. "There will be other lunches in the future," he says simply. Maybe he didn't understand. Maybe Izuku didn't make it obvious enough. Maybe–

"Especially if you succeed in your goal to join us in 1-A," Tokoyami

adds.

Oh. They understood. Izuku hasn't said a word about joining the hero course. Izuku hasn't, but Eraser had, when he told the class about the rehabilitation program. Izuku bites his lip and tries to keep from crying again.

"You're trying to join the hero course?!" Mei asks. When Izuku nods, she grabs his hands, staring intently into his eyes. "You have to promise to let me make your babies," she says, as serious as Izuku has ever heard her even though the turn of phrase still makes him flush slightly. "They helped you get this far, you know, so you owe me. I'll make you the best hero ever, Pen-kun."

"Of c-course," he agrees, eyes darting away from her intense stare. "Your b-babies are the b-best of the best, aren't they, uh, P-Pen-chan?" Mei blinks at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. She lets go of his hands, spinning around to grab Aoyama and Tokoyami by their elbows. Dark Shadows waves goodbye from over Tokoyami's head.

"Lunch!" she yells, pulling them on. She looks back at Izuku over her shoulder, "See you soon!"

Izuku watches as the four of them go, Mei eagerly questioning Tokoyami about whether he has ever tried to give Dark Shadow knives. Izuku shakes his head, so baffled that he can hardly believe that today hasn't just been some wild dream, but warm and pleased inside all the same. He wipes his cheeks dry on the ends of his sleeves, before making his way to the announcers' booth.

"Hizashi is getting us food," Eraser says, head tipped back against his chair and eyes closed, as Izuku shuts the door behind himself. "He should be back soon. Until then," he cracks an eye open, pinning Izuku in place with a red-eyed glare, "mind explaining what the hell you were thinking when you *blew yourself up* in the first round?"

"I was th-thinking that I had fallen behind," Izuku says, avoiding Eraser's judgmental gaze. There is a folding chair propped against the wall, and he grabs it and sets it up a healthy behind Eraser and Mic's chairs at the desk. "I had to c-catch up."

"I'd say you more than 'caught up.'"

Izuku grimaces. "I might have overcompensated," he allows. Eraser snorts gracelessly, hooking an ankle around the leg of Izuku's chair to

drag it slightly closer.

“No more explosions,” he orders.

“T-that might be difficult to avoid. What with Kats-suki, and all.”

“Then leave the explosions to him. And try not to provoke him.” Izuku refrains from commenting on how Katsuki seems to take his mere *existence* as provocation, but the thought must read on his face, because Eraser sighs and says, “Fair enough.”

Eraser closes his eyes again and they fall into a comfortable silence that last for a few short minutes before the door swings open. Mic balances a short stack of food containers on one arm, managing the door with the other. The entire situation is made far more precarious than it needs to be by Nedzu, perched with a shameless smile on Mic’s shoulder.

“Izuku!” Nedzu greets, hopping nimbly from his perch.

Mic stumbles, scrunching up his nose and sticking his tongue out behind the principal’s back while he juggles their food. While Mic drops food in front of Eraser and Izuku, stopping to ruffle Izuku’s hair as he does, Nedzu scrambles into the last empty chair. Eraser groans and kicks the chair lightly, causing it to roll a few inches further away while Nedzu laughs. He smiles angelically when Mic looks at him, leaving Mic to half-lean against the desk between the chairs, locking one of his ankles around Eraser’s, who allows the contact without acknowledgment.

“Killer job in those first two rounds, kiddo!” Mic says after one last dark look at Nedzu. “You really *blew* your competition out of the water!” Izuku feels his face redden, shaking his head as Eraser groans, but Nedzu’s eyes sparkle.

“Oh?” he asks. “I was hoping to check in on how my little protégé was doing.” There’s a certain irony to Nedzu calling anyone *little*, but Izuku thinks it would probably be incredibly impolite to point that out, so he bites his lip, avoiding the principal’s eyes.

“It’s been fine,” Izuku says, staring as his food. “I’m doing a-alright, I think.”

Mic presses a hand against his chest in a dramatically wounded gesture. “Fine? Fine, he says! You should have seen him! You’ll get a real kick out of it, Nedzu. Our Greenbean’s a real genius.”

“I’m not–”

“He *blew himself up,”* Eraser interrupts.

“And he won!”

“You won?” Nedzu asks, turning his attention to Izuku.

“I, yes? Y-yes,” he admits, scratching his cheek. “The first round, at least.”

“And the cavalry battle?”

“My team came in s-second.” Nedzu and Mic both grin and Izuku feels a bubble of warmth inside him, something like pride. Of course, it’s far too soon for Izuku to be proud of anything – he hasn’t even begun to make up for all the things he has to be ashamed of – but the feeling lingers in his chest nonetheless, the warmth of it only barely dulled by the shadow of guilt.

“Who did you pick for your team?”

“They p-picked me, mostly,” Izuku laughs lightly. “Aoyama Yuga, Hatsume Mei, and Tokoyami Fumikage."

"Tokoyami? Have you confirmed your theory from last week, then?”

“Oh, um, yeah.” Izuku glances to Mic, who has cocked his head curiously, and Eraser, feigning disinterest. The warm feeling fades immediately, replaced with something itchy and uncomfortable. “I was r-right.”

“Right about what?” Eraser asks, betraying his attention

While Izuku fumbles, Nedzu responds, “Izuku noticed some discrepancies between Dark Shadow’s behavior and that of a typical quirk ‘familiar.’ He suggested that Dark Shadow might, in fact, be a separate, sentient being of their own with a shadow-based quirk.”

“Wait, wait,” Mic says. “And he was right?” His voice is heavy with disbelief, but Izuku isn’t offended. He thought the theory was outlandish when he suggested it. “What do you mean Dark Shadow isn’t Tokoyami’s quirk?”

“Tokoyami has… some kind of contact-based t-telepathy quirk,” Izuku explains hesitantly, poking at his food. “Dark Shadow definitely has a shadow m-mutation quirk. P-probably Tokoyami has only ever used

his quirk on D-Dark Shadow, so no one ever r-realized it was a separate, d-distinct ability."

"Did you tell Tokoyami this?" Nedzu asks. Izuku grimaces. He sticks some rice in his mouth, chewing slowly, hoping that the conversation will move on. Nedzu waits, as persistent as he is patient, dark eyes gleaming like little black beads. Izuku can feel each individual grain of rice sticking along his throat as he finally swallows.

"H-how am I meant to do that?" he asks. "This isn't just q-quirk theory, anymore, it's their actual l-lives. Think of the imp-plications. W-what will that actually mean for them? For their family? Imagine a stranger you just met giving you n-news like that out of the blue." During the cavalry battle, Izuku had forced himself not to think about it, setting such distractions aside until they wouldn't be a liability. With the one-on-one matches yet to come, it still feels too early to consider the issue, but the thoughts are a bit like quicksand, trying to pull Izuku in.

After a moment of silence, Eraser says, "…I'm going to have to make some very uncomfortable home visits." He sounds exhausted. Izuku doesn't blame him.

"Admittedly, I hadn't given much thought to ramifications of your theory being true," Nedzu says thoughtfully.

"Of course you hadn't," Eraser scoffs.

"Well, there's no use dwelling on it at this very moment!" Nedzu moves on with an easy brightness that makes Izuku squirm a little, dismissing the topic as casually as he would a discussion on the weather. "Izuku – how are you feeling about the final event? I assume you have a plan?"

Izuku nods, struggling slightly to keep up. "I won't have specific strategies until I know the m-matchups, but I know what my q-quirk will be." Nedzu tips his head, askance. Izuku, fidgets with his fingers. "Joint Fire Br-breathing and Pyrok-kinesis."

"A good choice," Nedzu praises. This time, his approval isn't something Izuku can bask in.

"It'll work," Izuku says, voice falling nearly to a whisper. "I've t-trained with them a l-lot. But I didn't r-really ch-choose it. Todoroki just caught me by sur-surprise."

“I think Todoroki caught *himself* by surprise,” Mic jokes. Izuku manages a weak smile. It would be funnier if Izuku hadn’t seen Todoroki’s face when it happened, if he hadn’t seen the flames reflected in his eyes, seen the bright horror that burned to life next to the fire.

Nedzu hums. “If I recall correctly, the supposed Midoriya Hisashi was meant to have a fire breathing quirk, wasn’t he? And your mother was telekinetic.”

“…Yeah,” Izuku says, confesses. His mouth is dry, tongue like sandpaper against his teeth.

Fire Breathing. Pyrokinesis. It is the perfect combination of his parents’ quirks – or at least, Izuku thought as much, back when he didn’t actually know the first thing about who one of his parents actually was. It’s the quirk he always wanted, the one he was always meant to have – that’s why All for One went out of his way to make sure Izuku had it.

He imagines a different life, where he is born with this quirk and only this quirk. Where his mother was never stolen from him, and his father loves him in a simple, easy to understand way that never hurts. Tomura is still his brother, and he has whatever quirk he was supposed to have, or maybe no quirk at all, instead of one that destroys everything he touches. Kurogiri isn’t there, but it’s for the best because he is somewhere happier, living a real life with a real name. In that life, no one ever dies.

Fathers don’t kill mothers. Sons don’t kill fathers. Brothers don’t kill brothers.

“And speaking of your mother,” Nedzu continues, voice still cheerful and unchanged, but eyes alert and knowing on Izuku’s face, “there’s another reason I wanted to speak with you before the third event. You see, I’ve been getting calls for the last hour from and old friend of hers – one Bakugou Mitsuki, actually.”

“Aunt Mitsuki?” Izuku asks, hollow and shocked. “What did she say?”

“All kinds of very colorful things, I assure you. Notably she demanded your phone number or address and threatened to storm the building if we didn’t let her see you.”

Izuku can picture it easily. Aunt Mitsuki had always been a lot like Katsuki in that way – determined to get what she wanted, regardless

of what tried to stop her. She was a forced to be reckoned with, and Izuku had always loved her for her brazen confidence, the unapologetic way in which she cared about things.

But Izuku supposes he hadn't imagined that he would still be one of the things she cared about.

"What did you tell her?"

"That we can't release student information without consent, of course!"

Disappointment spears Izuku through, unexpectedly intense. "I consent. Can I – can I consent?" he asks, looking between Eraser and Mic. "Can I s-see her?"

"Of course, kiddo," Mic assures him instantly.

Eraser, on the other hand, thinks for a moment. "We should be able to arrange something," he agrees. "At least one of us will need to go with you, but you're allowed to leave campus as long as you're properly supervised. This shouldn't be an exception."

"I want to see her," Izuku says, as firmly as he can when his voice is trembling with a nauseous mix of wistfulness, relief, and nerves.

"How about this?" Mic says, speaking in soothing low tones. "They're about to announce the third event. You get back down to the arena, and Sho and I can give Mrs. Bakugou a call to set something up so she'll leave Nedzu alone."

Somehow, Izuku had nearly forgotten all about the third event. In the course of a single conversation, Nedzu had managed to completely unbalance him, as Nedzu often does, pulling at invisible strings that yank Izuku around in half a dozen opposing directions. Rumors never could have prepared Izuku for what it's actually like to interact with UA's principal, as frightfully intelligent and unempathetically curious as he is.

"Sound good?" Mic prompts when Izuku doesn't respond.

Izuku nods, gathering his bearings. The sports festival is in front of him, demanding his attention. Everything else can wait.

Katsuki knows exactly four names on the tournament bracket.

He finds his own first, at the very end, paired up with another he doesn't recognize. *Uraraka*. He squints, mutters the name under his breath, as if that will help him recall who the hell he is meant to be facing. It's a futile exercise - Katsuki is not good with names, and he is even worse at paying attention to the random extras around him. It's never posed much of a problem before, but he'll admit now that it's a bitch for a preparing strategies in advance.

Katsuki finds Todoroki, the half-and-half bastard, on the other side of the bracket. Right above that, the two other names Katsuki recognizes are paired together, a combination that makes his fists and stomach clench in tandem. Kirishima, Shitty Hair. Midoriya, Deku. Right at the very fucking beginning.

Do you really want to know?

Katsuki finds Shitty Hair standing close by with Raccoon Eyes. They look between the bracket and each other, both smiling stupid, anticipatory grins as they chatter. Shitty Hair raises an arm, waving wildly to someone. Across the field, Deku lifts a meek hand in acknowledgment.

I'll tell you.

Katsuki moves without thinking about it. "Deku!" he calls. The scrubs with Deku bristle as Katsuki approaches. Goggles sticks her tongue out at him while that weird bird shadow creature drapes itself over Deku's shoulders. Katsuki stops several feet away from them, sneering at the group before turning his attention to Deku exclusively. Deku stares at him, unblinking. Katsuki jerks his chin up, ignores the prickle of raised hair along the back of his neck.

If you'll listen.

"I'm ready to fucking listen," Katsuki says. "Or whatever."

Deku smiles. Not at Katsuki, thankfully, but to the extras around him. "I'll s-see you guys later," he tells them. "Good luck in your m-matches!"

"If you're sure," Sparkle Fucker says doubtfully.

“Best behavior, Blasty!” Googles commands, hands on her hips.

Bird Head says nothing, giving Katsuki a considering look while his pet shadow monster hisses from Deku’s shoulders. Katsuki bites his tongue not to growl back at the thing, fixing his attention on a sheepish-looking Deku. He pulls the shadow thing’s talons out of his shirt, and Katsuki turns away, heading off with long strides that leave Deku scrambling behind him.

Without looking back, Katsuki leads the way to a side tunnel, away from the waiting rooms and out of the way of the commotion of those participating in the recreational games. Deku follows silently. Katsuki flexes his jaw before turning to face him, leaning back against the cool concrete wall of the tunnel. Deku presses himself against the opposite wall, slumped down to make himself look deceptively small, staring at the light that spills over his shoes.

“Well?” Katsuki asks when Deku doesn’t so much as look at him. “You gonna tell me your sob story or not?” His voice trembles slightly, as do his hands. He fists them, crossing his arms and tucking them into his elbows.

“Are you going to listen?”

“I fucking said I would, didn’t I?” Deku finally looks at him, eyes assessing, almost black in the shadow that slices across his face. “What the fuck *happened* to you, huh?”

“Nothing happened to me, Kacchan. *I* happened.”

“Don’t call me that,” Katsuki snaps.

Viscerally, he remembers a dead-eyed boy, ten years old, sitting in empty silence on the bed of their guest room. *I think you were right about me, Kacchan,* that terrible shell of a person had said. Five years older, and his eyes are somehow even colder, even more hollow. Last time, Katsuki ran, hid away in his room. But he’s five years older now, too. Five years older, five years stronger, and he braces his back against the wall and glares across the space between them, suffocating any pathetic parts of himself that might want to waver.

“Sorry,” Deku says.

“Are you actually gonna explain anything?” Katsuki asks, voice carefully controlled. “Or are you just gonna speak in vague, shitty riddles and waste my time?”

“S-sorry,” Deku says again. His terrible eyes finally leave Katsuki as he tips his head back against the wall. “I still don’t really know how to t-talk about it. W-where to st-start.” He smiles slightly, like a wound across his face.

“Why the hell are you in Japan?” Katsuki questions, because it is as good a place as any to start. Why Deku is *here*, when he was supposed to be somewhere else, *anywhere else*?

“I never left.”

“But your dad–”

“My dad,” Deku interrupts. Katsuki grits his teeth and allows it. “You were right, you know. About my q-quirk. I got it from h-him. It really is a v-vil-villain’s q-quirk.”

Katsuki’s brow furrows as he parses the words. “So what, your old man is one of the bad guys, then? And you fucking joined him, like some shitty family business?”

“He was *t-the* b-bad g-g-guy,” Deku whispers, tears glinting along his waterline, unshed for the moment. “The *w-worst* guy.”

“Fucking figures,” Katsuki growls. There is something, though, that nags at him, a lose thread that he can’t help but pull. “Where is he now?”

“D-dead,” Izuku says, tears spilling over when he blinks.

“Oh.” Katsuki is not surprised, but he feels uneasy all the same, insides churning. “Good,” he grits out. “If he was a fucking villain, then good. Whoever offed him should have finished the fucking job,” he adds, glaring pointedly at Deku.

It is an instinctive retreat into familiar territory, a desperate reminder of where they stand. Deku is a villain, better off dead or jailed – Katsuki has known that for most of their lives. Deku knows it, too. He hunches in on himself, wrapping his arms around his stomach. Tears drip freely from his chin. He looks almost like Katsuki remembers him, pathetic and fragile and at Katsuki’s mercy. Nothing like the strange, blankly confident version of Izuku that came out of nowhere just to sweep Katsuki’s feet out from under him.

“I’ve thought about it,” Deku murmurs to the ground, voice thick and muffled.

“Huh?”

“I’ve th-thought ab-bout it. F-fin-finishing t-the–” Izuku chokes, a guttural, wet noise that grates against Katsuki’s bones. “I’m the o-o-one w-who–” Izuku cuts himself off again, this time with a sob.

“What the fuck,” Katsuki says. His words echo hollowly against the tunnel walls, a sharp overlay to the formless background noise of Deku’s tears. “You – your dad–” Katsuki fumbles for words, apparently just as unable to string a sentence together. “What the fuck,” he repeats.

Izuku slides to the ground, a barely controlled descent that leaves him crouched against the wall with his head buried in his knees. His sobs fill Katsuki’s ears like static, like deafness, and Katsuki suddenly, very poignantly, has no idea what he’s meant to do. His arms fall limp to his sides, his hands still trembling faintly, and he can no longer tell himself that it is from anger. It is not anger that rises in him like a tide, filling his lungs and stealing his breath as waves crash over his head and pull him down, swallow him deep until he can’t tell which way is up.

Katsuki doesn’t know what to call it, but it’s not anger. Anger is hot and full. It makes him feel big, sometimes too big for his body, like he needs to release bits of himself to control the pressure or risk exploding. This, whatever this is, is cold and vacant, and it makes him feels frightfully small. Small enough that he could get lost in his own body, consumed by the cavernous empty spaces between molecules.

Deku’s father was a villain. And Deku had killed him. And in another universe, maybe one only slightly parallel to their own, Izuku isn’t crying in front of Katsuki because Izuku isn’t even around anymore.

Isn’t that what Katsuki has always wanted? Deku, gone. What does it matter what “gone” means, so long as he isn’t Katsuki’s problem, anymore? Well, it matters. Katsuki is suddenly realizing that it matters very much, as much as he wants to say it doesn’t.

Katsuki had found the lose thread, and he’d pulled. And now everything is unraveling.

“Stop – stop crying,” he says, voice distant to his own ears. “Stop fucking crying, Jesus Christ, what the fucking fuck. Please stop.”

Izuku pulls his head away from his knees, tossing it back against the wall with enough force that his skull cracks audibly against the

concrete. He doesn't flinch, just covers his eyes with his hands, chest shaking with stuttered, uneven breaths. His mouth is contorted into an ugly shape, his whole face crumpled and red. His throat bobs as he swallows forcefully. Over the course of a few seconds, his breathing slows, growing steadier, and those pained, broken noises stop falling from his lips. He scrubs his hands over his face, then lets them fall into his lap, staring up at the ceiling with wide green eyes. After a moment, he huffs a shaky exhale and his gaze drifts to Katsuki, still standing stock-still.

"Sorry," Deku says, voice hoarse but remarkably even, "I told you I don't really know how to talk about it."

"N-no shit." Katsuki curses himself as he trips over his words. "You – what the fuck?"

"Yeah," Deku agrees absently. "It is very what the fuck, isn't it? Some days the only thing I can think is *what the fuck?"*

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You wanted to know what happened. My father was a villain, so was I. I didn't want to be anymore, so I… did something about it. That's what happened."

"Why are you here? This is my fucking school, why did you have to come *here?*"

"I didn't plan to," Deku admits, picking himself up off the ground. "Tomura and my father are the ones who planned the attack on the USJ. I wasn't even thinking of you, then." The statement, as casual as it is, closes around Katsuki's throat like a garotte. "I came for Eraserhead, for his quirk. And when I was done with it, I came to give it back. I never intended to stay."

"Then *leave*."

Deku shakes his head. "I can't. This is the first chance I've ever been given to help people."

"So what?" Katsuki asks, barking out a fractured laugh. "Some naïve dumbasses make a shitty call and suddenly you think you can be a fucking hero*?"*

"No," Deku corrects with infuriating patience. "Someone like me could never be a hero. But the people I help won't know the difference."

Katsuki suddenly can't stand to look at him. His eyes burn. He wants to squeeze them shut, but all his rational thoughts scream that it would be moronic to leave himself *vulnerable* like that. Instead, Katsuki stares at Deku's shoes. Obviously, they must be different from the ones he wore when they were children, but they are the same obnoxious shade of red. Some things never change, apparently. Even when Izuku himself seems like an entirely different person, his shitty taste in footwear remains the same.

"Izuku," a new voice interrupts. Katsuki barely refrains from jumping, muscles tensing as his head whips around to where Hobo-Sensei has appeared down the hall. Deku, seemingly unsurprised, turns smoothly, a placid smile on his face.

"Is everything alright?" Hobo-Sensei asks, glancing between Katsuki and Deku.

"Of course," Deku says, as if he wasn't sobbing like something subhuman only a few minutes ago. "We were just talking."

"You've been crying," Sensei notes with a lingering look at the red puffiness beneath Deku's eyes.

Deku waves a sheepish, dismissive hand. "You know me, I c-cry easily." Sensei hums, staring hard at Deku, who merely keeps smiling, an embarrassed tinge leaking into the expression.

"If you say so," Sensei says finally, doubt still lacing his voice. "Come on, then. You know you're meant to stick with me outside of the events." He nods once to Katsuki before turning to lead Deku back down the tunnel.

"Deku!" Katsuki calls at their backs. Deku stops, half-turning to him. "You better make it to the final fucking round. We can settle this once and for all."

Katsuki will tear him to pieces, grind him to dust. Originally, he had wanted to face Half-and-Half in the finals, blast the pedestal right out from underneath the bastard, but that can wait. Deku can't. Katsuki will show him once and for all just how strong he is. Strong enough to protect himself, strong enough to *win,* even against Deku.

And then – and then it'll be over. Deku will still be *here*, which is the last thing Katsuki wants – or, at least, it *was* the last thing he wanted, before he heard the words *I've thought about it*, whispered like a fucking treasured secret. Deku will still be here – which is the second

to last thing Katsuki wants, preferable only to that twisted fucking reality where Deku isn't even… *around* anymore – but they can both just go on living their entirely separate lives. As if the other one doesn't even exist.

But they do. They *do* still exist, because that *matters.* It matters, but Katsuki won't be the one who has to deal with it, deal with Deku, because he can't fucking do that, he doesn't want to, he–

"Alright, Katsuki," Deku says, showing his teeth in a way that falls just short of a smile. "I'll see you in the finals."

Katsuki stares down the hall long after Deku and Hobo-Sensei disappear. He breathes, counting dutifully until the world stops looking like bleeding watercolors, and then he keeps breathing, flickering little explosions in his palm with each exhale.

It's not personal. It has nothing to do with him. These people don't even *know* him.

Tail Boy and Blue Boy dropping out is their *own* business. Asshole didn't drop out. Asshole just raised his chin in the air with a haughty smile that dared anyone to say something to him about it. That's proof that it's not Hitoshi's fault, that it's not his problem or his business.

The frog girl and the guy with all those arms moved up to fill the bracket, and no one said anything about them not deserving to move on, even though their team wasn't in the top four. Hitoshi's team *was* in the top four, which means he definitely deserves to be here. He earned his place at the top, and if someone else takes issue with how he did that, that's *their* problem.

It's not personal, Hitoshi reminds himself as Tail Boy slides into his conversation with Aoyama before it can even begin, cuts Aoyama off with narrowed eyes and a careful warning. It has nothing to do with Hitoshi. Tail Boy – and maybe Hitoshi should call him Ojiro, now that he knows his name – and Aoyama are both in 1-A, they know each other. They're classmates, probably friends, and it's normal for them to help each other out, to want each other to succeed. They don't know Hitoshi. He's a stranger, he's competition.

And maybe Ojiro just absolutely blew Hitoshi's chances of making it beyond the first round. And maybe Hitoshi doesn't have any classmates left in the competition to help him out, and maybe he doesn't have any friends at all, and maybe no one wants him to succeed. But it's not about *Hitoshi*, the world doesn't revolve around him, it's *not personal*.

Except it feels really fucking personal.

All Hitoshi wanted to do was feel the other guy out. Plenty of people were doing it – Asshole had approached Tokoyami with a smug smile, and Hatsume had charged right over to Iida. No one intervened in those interactions, even when Asshole promptly started being an asshole, or when Hatsume made Iida visibly uncomfortable by violating his personal space. Only Hitoshi had to be stopped. God forbid someone like him try to *speak* to his opponent off the battlefield. What did Ojiro think he was going to do? Take control of Aoyama right there and keep ahold of him all the way up until their match, securing his victory before the fight even started? Hitoshi couldn't do that even if he wanted to.

All Hitoshi wants is a moment to be alone. A moment where he doesn't have to pretend to be bored or indifferent or smug, where he can breathe and nurse his headache and wallow a little bit in his frustration at the situation.

He stumbles on Midoriya and Bakugou purely by accident. For a second, Hitoshi considers turning around and finding somewhere else, somewhere unoccupied, to hole away until the final event begins. Instead, he sighs and leans against the wall, crossing his ankles as he makes himself comfortable to listen.

See, unlike Ojiro and Blue Boy – Shoda – Hitoshi is unapologetically opportunistic. Hard work is only half of success – and that's if you're being generous. The other half is all dumb luck. Right place, right time, right circumstances. You need both luck and hard work to actually get anywhere in life. Most everyone in the sports festival got lucky in ways Hitoshi hadn't. They have the right quirks, powerful quirks that audiences adore. Lacking that, Hitoshi has to find his luck in other places, like half-hidden conversations that probably aren't meant to be overheard.

Now, Hitoshi wouldn't call himself a particularly nosey person. In truth, he doesn't really care much about who anyone is or what they're doing, so long as they leave him out of it. But a quirk like

Hitoshi's, as unlucky as it is, demands *ammunition*. So, Hitoshi has a special place in his brain where he carefully cultivates and stores shit he can use against people.

"I never left," Midoriya says.

"But your dad–" Bakugou begins, only to be promptly cut off. Hitoshi smirks slightly to himself. Family drama, no matter how slight, is always sensitive, an excellent sore spot to poke and nearly guarantee a response.

"My dad. You were right, you know. About my q-quirk. I got it from h-him. It really is a v-vil-villain's q-quirk."

Hitoshi's smirk slides off his face, cheeks suddenly feeling like a thick, stiff rubber. His breath hitches in his chest and he holds it there, straining his ears to catch every word with a newfound investment. He listens to Midoriya confess that his father is a villain – the worst of the worst, by his own admission – and Hitoshi can hear the tears in Midoriya's voice as he says the man is dead. He listens to Bakugou's stilted response, uncomfortable and lacking sympathy.

And Hitoshi listens, with mounting horror, to what comes next.

What the fuck? Hitoshi's thoughts echo Bakugou's frantic words. Midoriya devolves into inhuman sounds, heart wrenching and sickening. Hitoshi feels like he's going to be sick. He feels like – he feels like someone has stuck a hook in his gut and is yanking at his insides. He should go. He shouldn't have listened to any of this, but he certainly shouldn't stay and hear the rest, *ammunition* be damned.

God, he feels like a child thrust into a warzone. He's been playing with nerf darts for years, and now someone has placed a live fucking missile in his hands. Midoriya Izuku had – he had *fucking murdered* someone, his own *father*. And he – Jesus fucking Christ. This is not okay, nothing about this is okay.

"Stop – stop crying," Bakugou says, begs. And Hitoshi doesn't know Bakugou, not really, but a guy like that should never sound like *this*, voice cracked and small.

The tremor in the words hits Hitoshi like a bolt of lightning. He jerks away from the wall, promptly tripping over his own feet and falling, scrapping his palms against the ground as he catches himself. He freezes there, on his hands and knees, hoping, praying, that neither Bakugou nor Midoriya have heard him, entire body throbbing in time

with his heartbeat.

Midoriya keeps crying. Bakugou begs him to stop again, voice louder, more fierce, more desperate. Midoriya is not okay, Bakugou is not okay, *Hitoshi is not okay*.

Hitoshi stumbles to his feet, too clumsy to worry about being quiet, and then he runs. He runs all the way back to the waiting room class 1-C had been in before the start of the festival. Thankfully, the room is empty of other finalists, and Hitoshi can wedge himself into the narrow space between the cabinet and the corner without having to explain himself to anyone.

His bag is still in the room, the only one left after all his classmates have been disqualified and taken their things with them into the stands. It's within reach, and he stretches out of his hiding place briefly to snag it, pulling his phone and earbuds out with shaking hands. He folds himself back into his corner, curled around the bag in his lap. The canvas is rough against the raw skin of his palms.

He pulls up his contacts, jams his thumb against the screen until he hits the right button, ringing filling his ears. "Pick up," he says. "Pick up." The line clicks. Relief loosens all Hitoshi's joints as he lets his head fall to the side, resting his temple against the cool metal of the cabinet.

"Hitoshi?"

Hitoshi sighs softly, "Hey, Dad."

Chapter End Notes

CWs
Izuku breaks down while "explaining" his situation to Bakugou.
Hitoshi also has a bit of a breakdown of his own.
Suicidal ideation is implied/referenced, relatively vaguely, but more specifically and at length than it has been in past chapters. This is the most explicit IGG will ever get in regards to that particular theme, though. While Izuku's mental health oscillates, his depression isn't going to escalate past what has been seen in other chapters.

Here is the full bracket for anyone who is curious! Team Asui (Asui, Shoji, and Kaminari) came in 5th place because they didn't have nasty Mineta making them inherently worse, and also because I say so.

Team Midoriya: *exists*
Me, sobbing: They're FRIENDS, your honor!!!

Tomura & Mitsuki (feral): I am going to crash that festival RIGHT NOW to get to Izuku!
Kurogiri & Masaru (tired): Please sit down.

Izuku: Have you heard of the trolley problem?
Katsuki: Of fucking course I have, I'm not an idiot.
Izuku: What would you do?
Katsuki: I'd blow up the fucking train!
Izuku, nodding: I slit the train's throat.
Katsuki: …I suddenly don't like this metaphor.

Hitoshi: Midoriya is such a hero brat, I can just feel it
Izuku: My father was a villain and I killed him
Hitoshi: ,,,Dad, pick me up, I'm scared

In retrospect, this chapter really went from "f is for friends who do stuff together" to "I'm just a kid and life is a nightmare" in the blink of an eye, huh

Next Chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part VI
Update: Apr 1
(For real this time. Gonna take a week off. Probably. Maybe.)
(Also, hate the fact that that's April Fool's Day, you have nothing to fear from me on that front.)

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part VI

Chapter Notes

CWs in endnotes!

I'm once again apologizing for my uncertainty on how to write the sports festival, but luckily for you, I can't ramble incessantly about it because the Discord apparently loves angst, so my character count is being strictly rationed

First, some awesome fanart (X) from Dewdrop!!

Now memes!
Cade: X
Cloud: X X X X X X X X X X
Roman: X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crowd cheers wildly as Eijiro walks onto the field, and the grin already on his face spreads wider in response. When he first entered the arena that morning, the sight of the stands, filled to the brim with attentive and expectant faces, had fed the deep well of anxiety in his stomach. It was nearly hard to keep smiling, then, when an insidious voice clawed its way up from his chest and whispered that he was going to make a fool of himself.

But he hasn't! At least, not yet, but he squashes that reminder back down where it belongs. He came in ninth – ninth! – in the first round, and then first – *first!* – in the second. Sure, the cavalry battle was a team effort, but he was part of that team. Maybe you could argue that Bakugou did most of the work, and Eijiro wouldn't necessarily disagree, but Bakugou couldn't have done any of that work to begin with without Eijiro enabling the use of Explosion.

Eijiro is proud of how far he's come. He's proud he got into the hero course, he's proud he hasn't gotten kicked out, he's proud to have made it to the top 16 of the sports festival. And he deserves that pride, because he worked hard to achieve these things! If anyone else did what Eijiro has done, he would call them manly, and he shouldn't exempt himself from that same praise. No nasty voice in the back of his head is going to convince him that it's a fluke or that he shouldn't be here. The stadium is full of people who cheer when he steps onto

the field, and Eijiro *isn't* going to make a fool of himself. He's going to give them something to cheer about!

Present Mic's voice echoes over the crowd, "Let's kick off the first round of our final tournament, shall we? Manly and passionate hardening – from the hero course, it's Kirishima Eijiro!" Kaminari is definitely going to tease Eijiro for that introduction later. "Versus the mysterious strategist who really *heated up* our first two events – Midoriya Izuku!"

On the other side of the field, Midoriya stands firm and steady, eyes fixed solely on Eijiro, as if deaf to the swelling cheers his name evokes. There are a lot of things about Midoriya that don't make sense, Eijiro is beginning to realize. Specifically, his relationship to Bakugou – Eijiro just doesn't understand what's going on there.

In the last few weeks, Eijiro likes to think that he's come to know Bakugou pretty well – at least, better than anyone else in 1-A has managed. Eijiro is about 90% sure they're friends, at this point. So as much as some of their classmates like to think that Bakugou is an entirely irrational, one-dimensional rage monster, Eijiro knows that's not true. Bakugou is – well, explosive, to say the least. But he can actually be a pretty chill dude when nothing is getting on his nerves! He's a nerd, and a neat-freak, and when he's left to his own devices, he spends most of his energy on training and schoolwork without sparing a thought to the things or people who he considers beneath him. So, almost everything and everyone.

Which is a pretty cruddy attitude, Eijiro can't really argue otherwise. Yeah, Bakugou should really learn the names of their classmates instead of staring blankly at them and handing out demeaning nicknames – though, on the topic, Eijiro is pretty sure Bakugou actually *does* know at least his name, even if he still never uses it. But that's not the point; the point is that no matter how it may look, Bakugou's not actually the type to go around picking fights.

Bakugou only starts shit when he's been provoked. Or at least, when he *thinks* he's been provoked, which is an important distinction because Bakugou's idea of provocation definitely doesn't seem to match up with the dictionary definition. The result is the same though, just maybe a bit less predictable. Bakugou comes into class, and he sits down, and he does his own thing. He looks at his phone or his schoolwork or something, and yeah, he glowers while he does it, but that's just the way his face is. He never starts yelling or snarling until someone *else* does something to spark his temper – usually

Kaminari, on purpose, or Iida, on accident.

Iida is a great example, actually! Because Bakugou doesn't like Iida. Well, Bakugou maybe doesn't *like* anyone, but he actually *dislikes* Iida. But he just ignores him, right, because he dislikes him, but Bakugou's whole deal is that the things and people he dislikes don't deserve his time or attention. So Bakugou mostly just doesn't acknowledge Iida's existence, until the poor guy tries to lecture him on something, and *then* Bakugou explodes because he's being forced to interact with this person he thinks is beneath him.

And Eijiro's not going to defend that type of reaction. He can like Bakugou and also acknowledge that the dude really needs to get a grip on his temper, and maybe pull his entire head out of his ass while he's at it, because their classmates are actually all really neat people. But at the same time, Eijiro understands *why* Bakugou reacts the way he does, and it's *not* just because screaming at people is his passion or something like that. Bakugou is loud and brash and abrasive, but Eijiro is positive that he's not actually a *bad* guy.

Unless, apparently, you're Midoriya Izuku.

Bakugou *focuses* on Midoriya in a way Eijiro frankly didn't think Bakugou *could* focus on anyone other than himself. It's like everything Midoriya does, even just existing, instantly snaps the at-best thin thread of Bakugou's temper. There's a sharper edge to that anger, too – something less superficial than the tantrums he throws when someone says something to piss him off.

Eijiro thinks Bakugou *hates* Midoriya. Most of class 1-A would probably claim that Bakugou hates everyone, based on the way he snaps at and insults them. But that's just what indifference looks like on a guy like Bakugou. The way he reacts to Midoriya – that's what Bakugou's hatred looks like.

And Eijiro just doesn't get *why*.

Midoriya seems like a fine person. Spirited and capable, if his presence at UA and performance in the festival are anything to judge by, but also flighty and nervous. He's the type of dude Eijiro would absolutely love to be friends with, but he'd never expect Bakugou to give Midoriya a second glance. If Midoriya were anyone else, Bakugou would see him cry and hear him stutter, and call him an extra and leave it at that.

Instead, Bakugou seems to hunt Midoriya down for the sole purpose of

getting angry at him. He does a similar thing with Todoroki, but Eijiro can understand that – Todoroki is strong and aloof in a way that presses Bakugou's buttons. But he's at least ten times worse with Midoriya, and Eijiro just *doesn't get it.*

Midoriya stands across from him, a silent mystery. Eijiro quells his curiosity and offers a smile, which Midoriya returns, more subdued.

"Let's have a good match," Eijiro says as Present Mic calls them to ready. With a nod, Midoriya shifts his feet into a fighting stance.

Eijiro charges forward the moment Present Mic announces the start of the match, fist and forearm hardening as he aims a punch for Midoriya's head. The blow is easily diverted, and Midoriya retaliates with an elbow to the gut that Eijiro hardens in time to mitigate. Midoriya hisses, dropping beneath the next swing of Eijiro's fist.

As Midoriya pops back up behind him, Eijiro pivots to follow. Midoriya is fast, faster than Eijiro is even when he's not made stiff and weighty by his quirk. This game of chase is familiar to Eijiro from his sparring with Bakugou, though familiarity makes it no less frustrating. Eijiro hits hard *when* he hits, but using Hardening offensively still feels clunky and slow, like he is moving through water. He makes as if to aim another blow at Midoriya's head, hoping his opponent will fall for the feint and he'll be able to get a hit in on his ribs.

Midoriya twists to the side and raises his own arm – his form is bad, terrible actually, he'll break his hand if he tries to punch anyone like that, much less Eijiro. But rather than try to drive his fist into Eijiro's stone-edged face, Midoriya opens his palm, and then Eijiro is hacking and cursing as his eyes and throat both burn with foreign grit.

"Oh, an old classic!" Present Mic crows through the stadium. "Bit of a *dirty* trick, huh?"

Eijiro jumps back, putting distance between himself and Midoriya while his vision is blurred. Blinking rapidly to encourage tears to clear his eyes, Eijiro fights the urge to rub his face while he spits dust from his mouth and tries to keep track of Midoriya's movements. As terrible as the grating burn of his eyes is, it's another thing Eijiro has grown accustomed to through his spars with Bakugou, whose quirk produces no shortage of smoke and dust. Of course, Bakugou turns out to be far louder and more predictable than Midoriya.

Heat flashes along the back of Eijiro's neck, skin tightening under the sudden onslaught in the brief second before his reflexes kick in,

hardening the entire length of his back. Orange light flickers on the very edges of his vision. Eijiro curses himself for not considering the torches positioned along the boundary line, for not connecting them with the whispered conversations of his classmates about Midoriya stealing away Todoroki's fire at the end of the cavalry battle. Thankfully, Hardening holds up well against heat, at least over short time periods.

While the flames fan out against his back, licking around his sides, Midoriya closes the distance between them. Eijiro folds with the punch delivered to his stomach, skin crackling to rigidity only a fraction of a second *after* Midoriya makes contact. The blow isn't too hard, winding Eijiro only slightly and not staggering him at all, but before he can straighten up, a hand closes around the top of his head, slamming his chin down into the knee that rises to meet it. Blood fills his mouth in a burst of copper as his teeth snap closed around his tongue.

Before Midoriya can withdraw, Eijiro seizes him by the shin, anchoring them together while he drives a heavy hit into Midoriya's abdomen. While Midoriya wheezes on a stolen breath, Eijiro disengages, finally managing to blink his eyes clear. He spits again, blood this time, licking it from the points of his teeth.

Midoriya straightens up, eyes dark and serious. Fire heaves behind him like a living thing. Now this is someone Eijiro can see Bakugou taking seriously, though he still has to wonder what Midoriya has done to earn Bakugou's ire rather than his *respect.* He'll save the wondering for later, though – now's not the time for it.

Hoping to catch Midoriya before he can completely recover, Eijiro runs forward. Flames rise between them like a shield, but Eijiro charges through them, heedless of the heat and determined to press his advantage. But Midoriya sees him coming, just like he did at the beginning of the match, and as Eijiro's attack sweeps over his shoulder, Midoriya is grabbing him by the elbow before Eijiro can wind back another hit.

Eijiro tries to brace himself, tries to tear himself away, but his feet leave the ground before he can gain any traction. Midoriya's shoulder is a hard bar against Eijiro's chest, and then he is airborne, a dizzy second where the intense green of Midoriya's eyes is replaced by a blur of grey-brown and then blue as Eijiro is flipped around. He crashes to the ground with the distinct sound of rocks clashing against each other, gasping as the air is driven out of his lungs.

“Kirishima Eijiro is out of bounds!” Midnight calls out before Eijiro can struggle up onto his elbows. “Midoriya Izuku moves on to the next round!” Match decided, Eijiro collapses back onto his back with a breathless groan, ankles hanging over the white boundary line. He bangs a fist against the ground, groaning again. Halfway through, the sound morphs into a tired laugh.

“Are you alright?” Midoriya asks.

“Winded,” Eijiro gasps, voice hoarse as he waves a hand to brush off Midoriya’s worries.

Eliminated in the first round. Man, talk about disappointing. Eijiro had wanted to make it at least to the second. Well, he *wanted* to win the entire thing, but he came in knowing that that probably wasn’t going to happen. But hey – that didn’t stop him from giving it his best! He’d done everything he could, and he may have lost, but that doesn’t mean he failed! He didn’t go down without a fight, and that’s something to be proud of.

When Midoriya offers a hand, Eijiro takes it. He’s grateful for the assistance when his knees wobble beneath him, new aches making themselves known as the adrenaline leaves his system.

“That was a great match!” Eijiro enthuses when he catches his breath. “Super manly! I can’t believe you got me with that dust trick!”

“Sorry,” Midoriya says. “It was a bit underhanded.”

Eijiro brushes him off, “Don’t apologize, man. It was a smart move!”

Midoriya offers a thin smile. “You should probably get to Recovery Girl,” he says.

“Hmm? I’ve had dust in my eyes before, no big deal. Nothing to worry about!”

“Your mouth is full of blood.”

Midoriya points behind him, and Eijiro turns to see his own face, blown up across one of the stadium screens. His teeth, fully exposed by his grin, are coated red, and he slaps a hand over his smile with a sheepish laugh.

“Forgot about that,” he admits, smacking his lips as he suddenly becomes aware of the metallic flavor heavy in his mouth. He sticks his

tongue out, crossing his eyes to try to catch sight of the wounds there. “I guess I should make a trip to good ol’ RG then, huh? Good luck with your other matches!”

Eijiro jogs down the tunnel to where Recovery Girl is set up, waving a farewell to Midoriya over his shoulder as he goes. Bakugou leans against the wall outside the infirmary, glowering first at the floor, and then Eijiro when he catches his attention.

“Fucking took you long enough,” Bakugou growls.

Eijiro presses a hand to his heart. “Aw, bro, were you worried about me? I’m touched.”

Bakugou scoffs. “As if I’d worry about your dumb ass. Quirk.”

“Huh?”

“Show me your quirk.”

“Why would I do that?” Eijiro asks as he holds up a hardened fist for Bakugou’s inspection.

“Because I fucking said so, that’s why,” Bakugou responds, though the words lack bite. “Cool, now get your damn fist out of my face.”

Eijiro laughs, “Man, Bakubro, you are one weird dude.”

“Shut up. And get the old lady to fix your mouth, Jesus Christ, you look like something out of fucking shark week.”

“I know! I forgot all about it until Midoriya pointed it out. Hey – should I call him Midoriya or Izuku? I don’t want to make him uncomfortable.”

“How the fuck should I know?” Bakugou asks.

“Well, you know him, don’t you?”

Bakugou’s upper lip twitches. Eijiro expects him to yell, but his voice is quiet, if intense, when he says, “Not as well as I thought I did.”

The words seem heavy, somehow. Yet another thing to add to the list of stuff Eijiro absolutely does not understand about this situation.

“You’re no help,” he sighs, forcing normality. “Don’t know why I bothered asking, you’re the one who calls people things like *Shitty*

Hair, after all."

"You have shitty fucking hair."

"I also have a *name*. It's Kirishima Eijiro." Eijiro is pretty sure Bakugou already knows this, but a reminder never hurts, just in case. Bakugou grumbles and shoves him through the infirmary doors.

Kirishima Eijiro. Quirk: Hardening.

A straightforward fighter. Limited strategy. Physically strong even without quirk. Quirk enhanced blows can easily bruise, scrape, and fracture, as well as winding or disorienting opponents, allowing subsequent hits to land. Potential for internal bleeding. Countermeasures: prioritize dodging – movements tend to be slow and clearly telegraphed. Outlast – not well suited to drawn-out fights. Take advantage of flagging endurance if necessary.

High defensive capabilities. Hardened skin is practically impervious to unenhanced physical blows (stone chips stone – can Hardening break Hardening?). Barehanded attacks against Hardening are likely to be self-destructive. Cannot be burned but can be sensitive to heat over long-term exposure (becomes brittle with the cold?). Countermeasures: speed and unpredictability – Hardening must be consciously activated and therefore cannot protect against an unanticipated blow. Specific targeting – eyes and mouth remain vulnerable. Joints are likely less enforced to maintain flexibility.

Kirishima is a versatile opponent who excels in team scenarios due to his affable personality. A lack of creativity limits his abilities in one-on-one matches. High potential, but gaps in technique at this point are easy to take advantage of. Avoid his offensive maneuvers and adapt fighting style to take advantage of holes in his defense.

Outcome: assured victory.

“Did you go to see Recovery Girl?” Shouta asks when Izuku steps into the announcers’ booth, at least ten minutes earlier than Shouta expected him to.

“Am I allowed to, then?” Izuku asks in return, cocking his head to the side. “I wasn’t sure, since I’m supposed to be supervised.”

Shouta sighs. “Of course you can go to Recovery Girl if you’re hurt.”

“The restrictions are just a safety precaution,” Hizashi adds. He smiles as he says it, but there’s a sadness in his eyes, something soft and weary that Izuku too often evokes. “They’re not meant to compromise your well-being.”

“But isn’t it a little reckless? I could sneak away. Or Tomura could snatch me up.”

“Are you planning to sneak away?” Shouta asks flatly.

“Of course not.” Izuku pauses for a moment, considering. “Tomura’s not going to show up, either. Kurogiri won’t let him. I was just curious. But I don’t need to see Recovery Girl, anyway. It was a short fight, I’m fine.”

“Kirishima got you in the stomach. I know how hard that kid can hit.”

Izuku shrugs. “It’s just a bruise, really.”

Shouta sighs again, eying the kid carefully. He seems fine enough, but the way he *seems* is unlikely to be a reliable indicator of his actual state. Izuku stares placidly back, calm enough that Shouta is nearly unnerved.

“Are you good on your own here for a moment?” Shouta asks Hizashi as Todoroki and Sero prepare to take the field.

“Yep! I’m the one who’s doing all the hard work anyway. You’re moral support, at best.” Hizashi sticks his tongue out, scrunching his face up. Shouta rolls his eyes.

“All right then,” Shouta says, groaning as he stands. Izuku steps to the side as Shouta approaches the door. “With me, kid.”

He jimmies the door open with his elbow and a push of his shoulder, until Izuku reaches past him to hold it open. Shouta leads them a

short distance down the hallway to a bathroom, nodding Izuku inside. The lights flicker on with a florescent buzz as they pass the threshold.

“Shirt off,” Shouta orders gruffly. “Let me at least see how bad it is before deciding whether or not to force you to Recovery Girl.”

Without complaint, Izuku unzips his jacket, shrugging it off his arms and folding it haphazardly onto the counter between the sinks. He doesn’t remove his undershirt entirely, but he obligingly raises the hem of it so Shouta can assess the blooming bruise just beneath his ribs. The skin is a blotchy red, with faint hints of blue already developing around the edges, but it’s far from the worse bruise Shouta has seen in the shape of Kirishima’s fists. He clicks his tongue, awkwardly using his elbow to drag a plastic packet of topical bruise paste out of one of his pockets.

“Damn casts,” he mutters as the medicine falls to the ground. “That’s for you,” he tells Izuku, who has silently watched the whole spectacle, as brief as it thankfully was. “Just put it on the bruise, a thin layer should be fine. It will help with healing and numb the area a little in the meantime.”

“It’s really not that bad,” Izuku reiterates as he picks the packet up and tears it open.

“No, it’s not,” Shouta agrees. “But if it can be better, there’s no reason it shouldn’t be.”

Pinning his shirt up beneath one arm, Izuku carefully spreads the paste over his damaged skin. Shouta purses his lips. Besides the bruise, the kid is in admirably good shape, though Shouta isn’t particularly surprised on that front, given how much experience the kid has with all the tools at his disposal. His fingers and palms are slightly pinker than normal – from the fire, Shouta would guess, but the damage is hardly advanced enough to call a burn – and one of his elbows is very slightly abraded – which is what happens when you try to elbow stone in the stomach. But all in all, Shouta will admit that a trip to Recovery Girl would be overkill.

Still, he’s worried for Izuku. Physically he’s fine, but there has been something off with him since lunch, and there is no ignoring how unusual his current behavior is. So quiet, so obedient. No stuttering, no stubborn insistence that Shouta doesn’t need to worry about him. Where’s the flustering, the reflexive denial that he is deserving of any care and concern?

Carefully, Shouta asks, “How are you feeling?”

With a last smear of his fingers, Izuku lets his shirt fall back into place, tugging the side of it away from his skin so it doesn’t stick to the ointment. He meets Shouta’s eyes, the both of them staring silently at the other for a long moment. The kid tips his head and hums thoughtfully, considering.

“I’m not,” he admits. He doesn’t sound guilty. Of course he doesn’t – he doesn’t *feel* guilty. Not now, at least. He probably will later.

Shouta is disappointed to hear it – in himself or Izuku, he can’t say. Probably himself. He wants to say he is disappointed the kid activated whatever emotional suppression quirk he has, but can Shouta really blame him? Izuku is the type of person who feels *so much* all the time. It’s one of the most wonderful things about him, and simultaneously the fatal flaw that has made the kid’s life so tragically cruel. Considering everything Izuku has gone through, he has come remarkably far remarkably quickly, and Shouta can’t fault him from wanting to escape it all, especially with the festival undoubtably putting undue pressure on him when he’s already in a fragile state.

Shouta can damn well blame himself, though. It’s his job to take care of the kid, to comfort him, protect him even from the monsters on the inside, and Shouta has clearly failed to do that.

At least Izuku told him. Shouta can marginally assuage his guilt with that fact. Izuku stared at him, long and hard, and whatever he was assessing, he deemed Shouta worthy of being confided in. Whether that confidence was a matter of practicality or a reflection of their personal relationship, Shouta’s not sure. He hopes for the latter, suspects the former.

“Was it Nedzu or Bakugou?” Shouta asks, leaning heavily against the wall.

“Bakugou,” Izuku confirms. “I had to tell him about my father.”

Beneath his bandages, Shouta’s eyebrows shoot up. He’ll admit that he didn’t imagine that the conversation he interrupted involved that particular revelation. True, Bakugou had seemed shaken, but Shouta had assumed that their confrontation was just the result of Bakugou’s temper boiling over.

“Why activate this quirk again?” Shouta questions. “Hizashi would have helped you, you know that.”

“Mic has a job to do,” Izuku argues, shaking his head.

“Zashi would have *wanted* to help you.”

Izuku blinks, eyes clear but blank, not understanding. Shouta grits his teeth. You’d think that taking emotions out of the equation would make someone more rational – and that’s true, to an extent. Afterall, Izuku followed Shouta and let Shouta gauge his injuries, without the protests that his insecurity and self-worth issues would normally elicit. Hell, he’d thrown dirt in Kirishima’s face. That alone should have been a dead giveaway that something wasn’t right, because Izuku would normally be far too conflicted to resort to a tactic like that.

But there are certain things that we feel for so long that they start to look like *facts.* Say something often enough and you start to believe it.

“That doesn’t make a difference,” the kid says after a moment. “Even if Mic had calmed me down, I would have been… raw, exhausted. I wouldn’t have been able to compete.”

Shouta grimaces with discomfort. There is too much here that he doesn’t want to dissect. He’s not good with things like this. Zashi is the emotional support in the little trio they’re becoming; Shouta is the voice of rationality.

He should have pulled Izuku out of the festival this morning – to hell with Nedzu and whatever he was scheming. The sports festival is – Shouta isn’t going to say it’s not important. It is, he gives lectures to his students every year on just how big an impact it can have on their futures. But it’s also just a *school event.* It is important, but it’s not the *most important* thing. It is not something to amputate a piece of yourself over. Shouta is disgusted with himself to have encouraged such recklessly self-destructive behavior over something that is ultimately so *trivial.*

“And you can compete like this?” he asks.

“I already have,” Izuku points out. “It’s probably easier, even, when I’m not hesitating over the fear of hurting someone.”

Shouta closes his eyes and tips his head back against the wall, tired and head aching. Whenever Yagi isn’t around, Shouta is grateful, but he finds himself particularly glad that the man isn’t here to witness this particular interaction.

“Sometimes it’s good to hesitate to hurt people,” he says slowly. Izuku

frowns at him, a shadow of offense that is nearly comical, in an absurd kind of way.

“I’m not going to do anything *bad,”* the problem child says. “My emotions are all still *there.* I know what they are, and I can use them to inform my decisions, they just can’t hold me back right now.”

Oddly, Shouta is not relieved to hear his ward assure him that he’s not going to go on a psychotic rampage. Please don’t let it be foreshadowing, he thinks, prays to whatever god listens to tired bastards like him.

“This isn’t a healthy way to deal with things.” Shouta forces the words out of his mouth, throat thick and sore around the syllables. “You can’t just turn off your emotions when you’re feeling something you don’t want to be.”

“I know,” Izuku promises. The assurance means very little. If he knows, that means he simply chose to do it anyway, and the fact that Shouta can’t blame him doesn’t make the whole thing any less concerning.

“As soon as the festival is over, you turn it off, or I turn it off for you.”

Izuku nods agreeably. He opens his mouth to add something but is cut off as the building shudders around them. Shouta lurches away from the wall, striding back to the door in two quick steps and shoving it open with his side. Behind him, Izuku snatches his jacket off the counter and rushes to follow.

“It’s fine!” he calls. “It’s just Todoroki!”

Dubiously, “Todoroki?”

“Yes,” Izuku confirms. “It’s not the League. None of the alarms are going off.”

“So you think it’s *Todoroki*?” Shouta asks, not grasping whatever leap of logic the kid has made.

Only a fraction of a second after the question leaves Shouta’s mouth, Izuku pulls open the door of the announcers’ booth. The room has been cast in a strange, muted blue light, and Hizashi sits an arm’s length from the desk, gaping, glasses askew.

“See?” Izuku says, gesturing unnecessarily to the spire of ice that has

blocked nearly the entire window. The monitors in the room show various shots of the now-obscured tournament field – Todoroki cracking ice from his limbs with sharp movements, Sero frozen in a glacier easily 100 times his size. On her stage, Nemuri, shivering and dumbfounded, gets a grip on herself and declares Todoroki the winner.

“How the *hell* did you guess that Todoroki had done *this?*” Shouta can’t help but demand. He exchanges a look with Hizashi, who shrugs with clear confusion. Izuku drags a chair close to the monitors, scrutinizing them intently as he pulls his jacket back on.

Absently, Izuku answers, “Todoroki’s got something to prove.”

Sero Hanta. Quirk: Tape.

Fast with high maneuverability. Tends to maintain distance. Adept at avoiding ranged attacks. Hard to hit. Decent endurance to outlast opponents. Countermeasures: sweeping, area-of-effect attacks. Terrain – quirk is best suited for urban use, incompatible with flat, barren landscapes.

Excellent capture abilities. Tape is strong and flexible, with a long range. Seems to be incredibly durable. Tape can hold up against physical strength and a wide variety of quirks (how wide?). Can reliably immobilize even fully conscious targets. Well-practiced with aim and trick-shots (similarities to Eraserhead’s capture weapon?). Countermeasures: strike first to avoid capture. Reversal – Tape tethers combatants together, at least temporarily. Can be taken advantage of to gain advantage or close distance (does the tape stick to quirk user?).

Todoroki Shouto. Quirk: Half-Cold Half-Hot.

Ice is powerful and well-controlled. Favors ranged attacks, proficient in close combat. Can immobilize and create adverse terrain for opponents. Prolonged exposure can cause frostbite and hypothermia. Countermeasures: shatter – ice can easily be shattered with quirks of weapons (more durable ice to craft improvised weapons?). Outlast –

quirk backlash leads to low endurance and extreme consequences when overused (*fire???*).

Trained combatant. More stamina that most peers. Already knows how to fight. Adaptable and strategic. Doesn't choke under pressure. Unlikely to hold back. Countermeasures: there are no shortcuts to compensate for experience. Fight dirty.

Sero has good upper body strength, but little to no close combat training. He prefers to detain his opponents than to engage with them. Out-speeding is his primary strategy. Relies on dodging attacks and outlasting opponents until he can achieve capture. Straightforward in his attempts. Needs to learn how to lay effective traps and diversify his strategy.

Todoroki is powerful and has more training that his classmates. Easily baited into expending more energy than necessary, speeding up quirk exhaustion. Needs to use his fire. Vulnerable to personal attacks. Has a chip on his shoulder (Todoroki Enji?). Get into his head to gain the advantage.

Outcome: Sero won't last a minute.

Chapter End Notes

CWs: Canon typical violence – sports festival bruh
Dissociation – hey, remember that emotion suppressing quirk? Yeah.
Unhealthy coping mechanisms – see above

Meme overflow!!
Fola: X X X X
Icarus: X
Kai: X
Rhino: X X
Roman: X X X X X
Sam: X
Zombs: X X

Also, if y'all have any predictions about who's going to end up on the podium, you should tell me!! I'm curious and I want to know how predictable I am lol

Kirishima: I don't get why Bakugou has such a problem with Midoriya.
Izuku: *absolutely destroys him*
Kirishima, spitting blood: I just don't understand, Midoriya is such a nice guy.

Izuku: *activates Dissociation*
Aizawa: …What did you just do?
Izuku: Nothing you can prove.

(the entire building shakes)
Aizawa: What the fuck?! We're under attack! It must be the League!
Izuku: It's just Todoroki.
Aizawa: … what?
Izuku: Yeah, he has daddy issues or something, I don't know his whole deal yet.

Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part VII
Update: Apr 8

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part VII

Chapter Notes

I'm a little late, but it's still Friday for me, and that's all that matters. My computer was lagging like hell the entire time I was writing this, which I'm sure has nothing to do with the fact that I keep IGG in a single word document that is nearly 400 pages.

Anyway, this chapter is a lot of little bits to finish up the first round. I had to manfully resist the urge to make an entire perspective scene for each match, because HCHH is already long enough. Sometimes you have to bite the bullet and sacrifice your eternal desire to study characters for actual plot progression. So, we end up with Izuku's analysis breakdown of all the matches and *mini* character studies because I couldn't resist. It's a short chapter, and honestly the closest thing to "filler" so far, but hopefully it's still enjoyable enough to read.
I played around with the format and structure of Izuku's analysis this chapter, but I will someday go back to edit the previous chapter to make things consistent. Until that theoretical day, bear with me.

And now for the Discord memes!
Cloud: X X X X X
Gourd: X
Roman: X X X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aoyama Yuga*. Quirk: Navel Laser.

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Aoyama Yuga, pages 1-4

Rapid fire attacks. Creates hard-to-dodge volleys. Beams can ricochet. High range. Difficult to dodge due to high velocity. Good aim. Countermeasures: predictive dodging – beams can only be fired straight ahead (potential for laser refraction?). Close combat – attack from side or behind.

Control of beam density. Can create burns and cause knock-back. Strong blast is potentially lethal. Light flashes can lead to disorientation (double-edged?). Damage to surroundings may create debris. Countermeasures: see above.

Shinsou Hitoshi. Quirk: name unknown.

> Manipulation of opponents. Quirk takes control of target (hypnosis? extent?). Verbal trigger. Countermeasures: silence – exact conditions of trigger unknown, don't take risks. Physical jolt – cancels quirk effect?
>
> Unknown factor. Limited information available on strengths and weaknesses. Hard to strategize against. Countermeasures: *caution*.

Aoyama has a powerful quirk but is limited by harsh backlash. Arrogant persona often prevents him from taking his opponents seriously. A direct blow from Navel Laser can easily be debilitating. Not getting hit needs to be a priority. Good aim is offset by backlash. Beam accuracy and intensity lowers with time. Endurance is poor. Outlasting is a viable strategy to gain the advantage.

Shinsou is a general education student. May have less training and/or experience as a result but making such an assumption is risky. Seems slightly clumsy. May be at a disadvantage in hand-to-hand combat. His teammates from the cavalry battle did not join him willingly – likely recruited via quirk. Suggests reasonably good stamina and reliance on quirk. Don't respond to anything he says. Don't underestimate him; aim for as fast a victory as possible.

Prediction: inconclusive, dependent on whether Shinsou can activate his quirk and his physical abilities.

Outcome: Aoyama seems aware of Shinsou's quirk (likely told by Ojiro Mashirao). Shinsou dodges attacks with difficulty – speed, reflexes, and coordination seem average to below average. Shinsou baits Aoyama successfully and sends him out of bounds.

Match: Shinsou.

The boundary line is three inches from Hitoshi's pinky when he trips over himself and lands hard on the ground. His palms sting and pulse as the scrapes from earlier – dear fucking god, that kid killed his father, what the hell is Hitoshi supposed to do with that information,

what kind of world is he living in – tear open. The impact jolts up his wrists, shaking his bones and sending a throb through his arms, echoed by all the pulsing points of pain where he wasn't quite fast enough to dodge Aoyama's laser.

Hitoshi pants, leaning forward over his knees as his elbows tremble and threaten to give out, threaten to collapse him backwards right over that dangerously-close boundary line. For the moment, Aoyama has ceased fire. When Hitoshi looks up, ignoring the way his vision swims, lagging a second behind the movement of his eyes, the blonde is smirking. He hasn't moved an inch since the match started, attacking from a distance that Hitoshi couldn't seem to close without getting hit.

"Wipe that look off your face," Hitoshi snaps, voice pathetically thin as he still struggles to catch his breath. "You think this is fucking funny? Funny that someone like me would even bother to try, huh? It must be so easy to look down on everyone when you've been put on a pedestal your entire life."

Aoyama has the good grace to look abashed, not that that does anything to soothe the sharp edges of Hitoshi's frustration. Pity is just as useless to him as condescension. All he wants, for once in his goddamned life, is a little *respect*, some *acknowledgement*.

His father is watching. His dad is actually watching, and he thought Hitoshi was doing *well*, and he sounded so surprised when he told Hitoshi that. And Hitoshi is going to keep doing well, he's going to surprise the whole lot of them, all the people who ever told him that his desire to be a hero was reaching too far when he was born with a quirk like Brainwashing. He's going to prove everyone wrong, he *is,* all he needs is a *chance*.

"No," Aoyama says. He closes his mouth around the word, sharp and aborted, sealing his lips together tightly, but the damage has already been done. In the back of Hitoshi's head, a light flares to life, a beacon. Compared to Aoyama's camera-perfect smile, Hitoshi's grin is vindictive.

"Walk out of bounds," he orders.

Like a doll, Aoyama does.

There is a moment of heavy confusion, audible in the silence that falls over the stadium, in the delay between Aoyama stepping over the line and Midnight calling the match. Hitoshi's breath feels like nails in his

throat, razors in his lungs.

He waits for questions, demands, outrage. These are the things he knows to wait for, the things that have always come to him in the past. But then there are the things he has learned not to bother hoping for, hope that swells up in him anyway, because this time it'll be different, it has to be. Hitoshi waits and he hopes for spiteful, contrary things, like respect and acknowledgement.

Cheer, god damn it, he thinks. Cheer, you fucking bastards.

And after a moment, the crowd does.

Tokoyami Fumikage*. Quirk: Dark Shadow**.

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Tokoyami Fumikage, pages 53-56

***The UA Project: Volume 1* – Dark Shadow, pages 77-80

> Versatile. High offense and defense. Dark Shadow is excellent for mid-range attacking and blocking. Claws and beak can inflict substantial damage. Not easily penetrable by most projectiles. Decent at hand-to-hand combat. Countermeasures: light – weakens Dark Shadow. Attack from multiple directions.
>
> Partnership. Telepathic communication. Awareness is shared. Hard to catch by surprise. Well-practiced team strategies. Countermeasures: distraction – Dark Shadow is particularly easy to distract (empathic connection?).

Monoma Neito*. Quirk: Copy.

**The UA Project: Volume 2* – Monoma Neito, pages 69-72

> Unpredictable. Strategy depends on copied quirks. Abundant possibilities available. Can be tailored to specific opponents. Hard to counter. Countermeasures: be adaptable – flexible thinking and fighting to compensate for unknowns. Outlast – strict time limit on copied quirks.
>
> Analytical. Good at find strengths of copied quirks and weaknesses of opposing quirks. Copied quirks tend to be carefully

chosen. Countermeasures: outlast.

Tokoyami is a unique opponent. Much of his physical strength comes from Dark Shadow, but their connection allows for seamless teamwork. Dark Shadow can be volatile. Emotional state and power are both strongly related to light. Connection may be a liability when Dark Shadow is particularly uncooperative (may be possible to play them against each other? risky). Light-based or multi-directional attacks are the best counters for Dark Shadow's high defense. Dark Shadow is less effective in close combat and can become a hinderance, but Tokoyami can hold his own under such circumstances.

Monoma's performance is highly conditional. He has a high ceiling and a low floor. Base abilities are fairly average, but Copy can theoretically give him the advantage in most battles. Highly restricted by time limit (flexible with further training?). Strategic, but commonly weakened by arrogance and easy to manipulate. Needs to focus on strategically pairing quirks together.

Prediction: inconclusive, dependent on Monoma's quirk set and strategy.

Outcome: Monoma copies Dark Shadow. Dark Shadow becomes distressed. Fumikage fails to calm her down and Monoma shoves them both out of bounds.

Match: Monoma.

"Now," says the loud blonde from 1-B, "let's see what you think of your quirk when it's turned against you." Dark Shadow bristles at the suggestion. She would *never* turn against Fumi. Except maybe sometimes at night, when it is very dark and she is very upset, but even then, she isn't *against* her Fumi. Besides, the sun is still out!

Smirking, the boy adds, "I've always wanted a pet." Dark Shadow hisses and internally, Fumi echoes her sentiment, though he is much better at keeping a straight face than she is.

The boy holds out his arms, and his fingers, splayed out at his sides,

lengthen and darken. He blinks, bringing his hands up in front of him as they twist into familiar talons, solid but blurry around the edges like all of Dark Shadow is. Quickly, the transformation races up his arms, disappearing beneath the sleeves of his gym uniform and reemerging from his collar, consuming his face in a veil of inky blackness, all too similar to Dark Shadow's own being, except tinted slightly blue rather than slightly purple.

What is he doing? Dark Shadow demands of Fumi. Fumi always knows the answers and always explains when there is something Dark Shadow does not understand.

I don't know, Fumi admits. *It must be his quirk.*

I don't like it.

The boy laughs. "Unexpected," he says. "But just as well. Who needs a familiar when you can just do it yourself?" He grins, mouth a slightly blacker black, eyes like blue lanterns.

Fumi steels himself, swiping out an arm, but Dark Shadow doesn't follow the direction. She shrinks back in closer to him, and they both roll to the side as the boy stretches a talon across the field towards them. The movement is fast and elastic and leaves grooves in the dirt where they were standing, and it is so, *so* familiar that it is uncanny.

"Dark Shadow," Fumi says sternly. It's her name, and it's also an order, one she has heard hundreds of times and is usually eager to obey.

I don't like it, she repeats. And despite his composure, she knows Fumi doesn't like it either, doesn't like this boy who has become like her.

Not, she notes, like *them.*

Like *her.* Like Dark Shadow and only Dark Shadow. Her, all alone, as she isn't meant to exist.

I don't want to play this game anymore. I don't like it.

Shoji Mezo*. Quirk: Dupli-Arms.

*_The UA Project: Volume 1_ – Shoji Mezo, pages 41-44

> Physically enhanced. High strength, durability, and reflexes. Good speed considering size. Excellent stamina. Physical abilities are passive. Quirk increases offensive and defensive power, but strength, etc. is independent of quirk use. Countermeasures: strategy – work smarter not harder. Judo techniques – turn size and strength into a detriment.
>
> Excellent senses. Good for stealth and information gathering. Makes sneak attacks ineffective. Countermeasures: abandon stealth tactics. Sensory overload (untested).

Ashido Mina*. Quirk: Acid.

*_The UA Project: Volume 1_ – Ashido Mina, pages 5-8

> Excellent technique. Control of acid solubility, viscosity, and corrosion. Enhances maneuverability. Can damage skin, gear, and environment. Potential for strategic targeting (i.e. gear, eyes). Countermeasures: temperature sensitive – acid freezes (tested) and may be flammable (untested).
>
> Dance experience. Increases overall physical abilities. Great body control. High speed, strength, and reflexes. Applies skills to hand-to-hand combat. Countermeasures: strategy – adapts poorly to unforeseen events.

Shoji is the physically strongest member of class 1-A. Due to his high strength and durability, he is difficult to beat in a straightforward battle of brawn. Hesitates to use much force against classmates. Unlikely to go on the offensive. Best strategy would be to out speed and manipulate his position to bring him out of bounds. Be wary of the risk of immobilization.

Ashido has excellent control of her quirk. She is stronger than many expect. Weakens in drawn out battles due to quirk exhaustion and poor long-term strategizing. Good dodging skills, but poor defensive ability. Tends to charge into battle headfirst with little planning.

Prediction: Shoji.

Outcome: Acid has negligible effects on Shoji. Shoji captures Ashido and carries her out of bounds.

Match: Shoji.

Mina had a plan! Plans might not really be her *thing*, but she makes them. They just don't always work out.

Like this one.

Okay, so, the plan went something like this: acid – skate, skate, skate – ACID!

It's not a bad plan. Simple, which is good – flexible, and easy to follow. And it takes into account the two big things Mina knows about Shoji. First, that Shoji is super strong, so she probably shouldn't get close to him. Acid attacks from a distance, then. Zero-risk offensive maneuvers! Second, that she's faster than Shoji, which she needs to take advantage of if she wants to win. So – skate, skate, skate. Just watch Shoji try to keep up when she's skating around so fast! If he runs after her, he'll probably just slip and fall in some of her acid and wouldn't that be embarrassing for him! Then throw in some more acid for good measure, rinse and repeat, and she's got herself a plan!

It was a good plan, Mina thinks. And she stands by the skating part of it. Problem is that Shoji didn't seem particularly bothered by the *ACID!* of it all. And unfortunately, that was the more important part, because without it she was just skating around the arena – which was cute and fun, but not doing her any favors towards the whole *winning* deal.

Now, there's a very good reason that Mina's original plan didn't look like this: acid – skate, skate, skate – PUNCH! Punching didn't feature anywhere in her original plan because, frankly, punching Shoji is a super dumb thing to do. But what's a girl to do when her acid fails her? Sometimes when the good plan doesn't work, you have to buck up and move onto the bad one!

Which is how she finds herself here. Squirming in Shoji's six-armed grip, which is carefully not too tight, even as she leaks acid all over him. She can't escape his hold no matter how slippery she makes herself, though, because the guy is just too big, basically cocooning her up in his arms.

“Sorry,” he says as he deposits her over the boundary line. Mina crosses her arms, huffing out a breath as Midnight announces Shoji’s victory. His arms, wet and shiny, have only a few faintly pink patches along them, even though parts of his shirt have been entirely eaten away. She really kicked up the potency towards the end there, and Shoji seems to have hardly noticed.

“Did I get you *at all?*” Mina asks, pouting as they walk together from the arena.

“…Yes.”

“Liar!” she groans. A second after, she laughs.

Yeah, losing sucks, but she can admit – it was a pretty bad plan.

Asui Tsuyu*. Quirk: Frog.

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Asui Tsuyu, pages 9-12

> Abilities of a frog. Swimming, hopping, climbing, projectile tongue. High mobility. Tongue is both flexible and powerful. Launches at high speeds. Excellent performance in aquatic and vertical environments. Countermeasures: temperature sensitive – hibernates in the cold, desiccates in the heat. Close combat – prefers long-range.
>
> Intelligent. Highly observant. Level-headed and analytical. Excellent at team strategy. Countermeasures: stay on guard.

Yaoyorozu Momo*. Quirk: Creation.

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Yaoyorozu Momo – pages 69-72

> Outstanding quirk potential. Good technique. Weapons training to compliment creation abilities. Training investment yields high returns. Countermeasures: strike quickly – time is a limiting mechanic.
>
> Intelligent. Can easily expand creation repertoire. Excellent strategist. Quirk allows for further versatility in planning. Countermeasures: overwhelm – gets flustered under pressure.

Asui is more focused on rescue and cooperation than combat. She is not particularly strong, but her tongue and legs are both powerful. Incredibly high mobility. Strategic and calm under pressure. Particularly excels in a team environment, forming strategies around various quirks. Debilitating weakness to both heat and cold (biological, likely can't be surpassed, support gear?).

Yaoyorozu has nearly limitless potential. Creation is limited by time (reduced with practice), size (circumvented by breaking items into constituent parts), knowledge (easily gained due to her intelligence), and energy (obtained through food. diet?). None of these are hard upper limits. All can be pushed, potentially infinitely. Her greatest weakness is her own lack of confidence, preventing her from adapting to unexpected situations. She is easy to overwhelm.

Prediction: Yaoyorozu.

Outcome: Asui pushes Yaoyorozu out of bounds before she can enact a strategy.

Match: Asui.

Failure is a horrible word.

Momo can break her life into a bunch of little failures. She shouldn't, she knows she shouldn't. She should look at the big victories and ignore the little failures. An A on a math test should be a success. The question she got wrong shouldn't matter. The mangled prototypes she creates are necessary steppingstones to the final product. No one gets everything right on the first try. The failures in between aren't important. Just little failures, on the way to success.

Potential is another horrible word.

"You're going to do great things, Momo," her mother tells her, smiling beatifically.

"You'll be amazing someday, Momo," her father says, sounding more and more like an omen the older she gets.

Everyone she has ever met has shared the sentiment. Family, friends, classmates, teachers. Yes, they all say, Yaoyorozu Momo has so much *potential*.

She wonders what happens to potential that is never met. Does it just waste away? Sometimes Momo feels like she is. Sometimes she feels empty, like one of her little matryoshka dolls.

“Yaoyorozu Momo is out of bounds!” Midnight calls, snapping her whip.

It took less than two minutes. Momo didn’t even notice it happening. She made herself a shield to buy some time while she created a rudimentary flamethrower, and then one, two, three strikes of Tsu’s tongue against that shield and Momo had slid out of bounds without even trying to stop it.

She straightens her spine as the crowd cheers, smiling graciously. Momo learned how to smile when she was very young, a silent lesson that her mother was careful to teach her very thoroughly.

Someday. *Someday* Momo is meant to be excellent. But not today, apparently. Today there is no potential, just failure.

What horrible words.

Hatsume Mei. Quirk: Zoom.

> Gear. Powerful and versatile. Unknown factors, hard to account for. Increases offense, defense, mobility, and more. Risk of injury and immobilization. Potential to counter or mimic quirks. Countermeasures: target gear – mediocre base physical abilities. Theft – acquire a gadget (feasible? reliant on ability to operate unfamiliar mechanics. high risk).
>
> Unpredictable. Support student. Unknown strategy, mindset, and skills. Chaotic. Ruthless. Little regard for social norms. Difficult to strategize against. Countermeasures: stay flexible – need to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Don’t underestimate.

Iida Tenya*. Quirk: Engine.

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Tenya Iida, pages 13-16

> Fastest of 1-A. Rapid acceleration and high sustained speeds (numbers?). Hard to track and hit. Can disorient opponents. Delivers high-powered kicks. Countermeasures: immobilization. Take advantage of downtime – pauses between sprints.
>
> Legacy hero. Resources to pursue extensive training. Generations of experience contributing to quirk technique. Familiar with professional tactics. Intelligent and strategic. Countermeasures: duplicity – take advantage of naivety. Creative strategy – rigid thinker, poor at adapting.

Mei makes up for any personal weaknesses with an armory of support gear. Gear covers a wide variety of functions. As the creator, Mei is intimately familiar with their functions. Proper gear use gives her the edge in most battles. Tends to be reckless. Prioritizes testing gear and impressing companies (winning?). Most gadgets are prototypes and may have exploitable flaws.

Iida is unmatched in speed among hero course students. Has more experience and training than the majority of his classmates. Excellent quirk control. Limited by fuel (orange juice, why?) and engine temperature (counteract with support gear?). Good situational awareness and strategy. Lacks in creativity and adaptability. Easy to manipulate.

Prediction: inconclusive, dependent on Mei's motives.

Outcome: Mei has shared gear with Iida (*motives?*). With his assistance (unwilling) she demonstrates the function of several support items she has invented*. She steps out of bounds (motive: advertisement).

*See notes on page 97-100 for further details

Match: Iida.

When Ojiro dropped out before the final round, Tenya could have expounded at length about his exact feelings on the situation. It was

noble of his classmate to stick to his principles, but ultimate foolish of Ojiro to sacrifice the opportunity posed by the sports festival over such a trivial matter.

Tenya thought this the same way he thinks most things – like a fact. A moment of thought, and he had decided his stance on the matter, firm, without a single doubt. This is just how Tenya *is.* Occasionally, Tensei will make jokes about it. He says that it's ironic that Tenya is so stubbornly rooted, when the Iida family has made a name for themselves by running, moving, fast and flexible in battle.

Now, Tenya feels a bit unmoored. Noble, but foolish. What an easy thing to think when Ojiro was the one talking about pride. Tenya understands, now. The frustration he heard in Ojiro's voice pings around inside Tenya now, bouncing between his ribs with a vengeance.

Ojiro was a noble man indeed, to voice his feelings so calmly. *I think it was that guy's quirk*, was all Ojiro had said about the person who stole his chance at an honorable victory. Tenya holds Ojiro's calm as an example in his mind and clenches his jaw around the urge to shout at Hatsume, who giggles from the sidelines, unrepentant as she bows to a targeted section of the crowd.

Tenya is nearly tempted to withdraw himself. Winning this match has meant nothing to him – less than nothing, even. It doesn't feel like he's won anything. But even with this new, painful perspective on the situation, Tenya stands by what he said to Ojiro. This is a rare chance for pros to see them. One of only three opportunities to start carving a place for themselves in the world before they are thrust into it. It would be foolish to throw this chance away.

Noble, maybe, but foolish.

Uraraka Ochako*. Quirk: Zero Gravity

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Uraraka Ochako, pages 17-20

> Excellent technique. Versatile quirk applications. Increases mobility, functionally immobilizes targets. Creative environmental applications. High weight limit (chance to improve

with training). Countermeasures: ranged combat – avoid touch to avoid capture. Situational awareness – avoid surprise attacks from environmental components.

Rapidly improving. Little prior training by learning quickly. Brave and spirited. Eager for teamwork. Learns from classmates. Pushing limits and developing new tactics. Rescue focused but shows interest in diversifying. Countermeasures: don't underestimate.

Bakugou Katsuki*. Quirk: Explosion.

**Hero Analysis for the Future: Volume 1* – Kacchan, page 2

**The UA Project: Volume 1* – Bakugou Katsuki, pages 65-68

Prior training. Quirk and combat style are well-developed. Primarily offensive. Power ranges from harmless sparks to potentially lethal. Excellent control of output. Some defensive applications. Blasts can intercept attacks and destroy projectiles. Can blind, deafen, and disorient opponents. Uses blasts for aerial movement. Countermeasures: maintain distance – Explosion is inherently a close-combat quirk. Foresight – fighting style has highly predictable components. Cold – inhibits quirk use.

Tenacious. Single-minded pursuit of strength and victory. Never surrenders. Prioritizing winning over physical well-being. Countermeasures: aim for unconsciousness. Manipulate temperament.

Uraraka has an excellent quirk for capture and rescue. A single person is trivially easy for her to float. Immobilization is only a risk when in close proximity. Debris can be weaponized for long-range or area-of-effect attacks. Quirk backlash (nausea, aided by medication, potential for support gear?) only becomes relevant at very high weights or when attempting to activate Zero Gravity on herself. Quickly innovating her strategy and technique. Potential for quirk development (gravity nullification vs gravity manipulation?). Currently not suited for intense combat.

Katsuki is powerful and vicious in achieving his goals. Doesn't hesitate to use extreme force. Controlled by his temper. Easy to manipulate into reckless action but increases risk of severe injury. Quirk overuse results in arm and shoulder strain, but Katsuki will not hesitate to push himself past his limits. Maintain distance if possible. Always stay on guard.

Prediction: Katsuki.

Outcome: Uraraka is unable to get close enough to use her quirk on Katsuki. Katsuki knocks her out of bounds.

Match: Katsuki.

Chapter End Notes

Mina is carried out of bounds in the embrace of Shoji's many arms
record scratch, freeze frame
Mina: Yep, that's me. You're probably wondering how I ended up in this situation.

Iida: Hatsume shared her gear with me so we could have a fair fight!
Izuku: I've known Mei for half an hour, but that does NOT sound like her.
Aoyama: Oui, she doesn't seem the type.
Tokoyami: It does seem discordant with the behavior I have seen from her thus far…
Mei: It does seem kind of out of character. She must be up to something.

Me: Welcome to Izuku's Advice Corner™! Say Izuku, what's your advice for dealing with Bakugou?
Izuku: Hit him until he's unconscious. That's all.
Me: Wow, cool! Thanks for coming everybody, this has been Izuku's Advice Corner™!

Next chapter: Half-Cold Half-Hot – Part VIII
Update: Apr. 16
(the last part, perhaps? finally??)

Half-Cold Half-Hot - Part VIII

Chapter Notes

CWs in endnotes!
Just realizing I “scheduled” this update for tomorrow, the 16th, because for some reason last week when I wrote the date, I was convinced there were 8 days in a week. There’s only a few scenes left in Half-Cold Half-Hot, so this is another short one.

Now, Discord stuff!
First an adorable Mina fanart from Gourd! (X)
And memes!
Cloud: X X X X X
Dev: X
Eggs: X X
Roman: X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X
Surya: X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Izuku heads back down to the waiting rooms for his match with Todoroki, he is careful to avoid Katsuki. Having just finished his fight against Uraraka, he’s certainly stalking around the tunnels somewhere, but staying out of his way is a simple matter for Izuku. All he has to do is stretch out his awareness and pinpoint the burnt caramel crackle of Explosion. He finds Uraraka, too, the light fizz of Zero Gravity next to the mercury and hot metal of Iida’s Engine. Todoroki is also preparing for their upcoming match, Half-Cold Half-Hot a tumultuous point of input from down the hall.

Izuku stays out of sight as Katsuki storms by. Neither of them needs to deal with the other at the moment – their earlier conversation was messy enough, and it clearly got under Katsuki’s skin if the excessively large explosion he let loose on Uraraka to blast her out of the ring was anything to go by. He and Izuku will fight in the finals, but interactions before then will only serve to sharpen Katsuki’s aggression further.

Izuku doesn’t bother trying to avoid Endeavor, though.

“Oh, there you are,” the hero says as he rounds the corner. Izuku already knew Endeavor’s exact height – 6’5” – but he seems taller in person, making it almost hard to meet his eyes when they are standing

this close together, but Izuku cranes his head back and ignores the crick it creates in his neck. Endeavor is hard to look at in general, actually, what with the flames dancing around his eyes and mouth. It's an intimidating effect, but an impractical one, both distracting and somewhat uncomfortably bright.

"Are you supposed to be down here?" Izuku asks.

"I watched your fight," Endeavor says, ignoring the question. That's fine, Izuku already knows the answer – no, Endeavor is attending the sports festival as a spectator, meaning these backstage areas are supposed to be off-limits to him, regardless of his ranking.

"You have a wonderful quirk," the hero continues, offsetting what may seem like praise with a fierce glower. "Who did you steal it from?"

"Actually, there's three, and I didn't steal them at all. My father did, decades ago, and then he gave them to me – it was a whole process. But I don't think that's what you were getting at." Endeavor's scowl, already perpetual, deepens, which is confirmation enough. "Did you need something, sir?" Izuku asks politely.

Endeavor draws himself up somehow taller, looming over Izuku, the flames around his face swelling and peaking to match the growing intensity of his glare. Izuku, of course, is unphased by this, but he breaks eye contact so the man will think he has perhaps succeeded in his little intimidation attempt. Endeavor is far from the scariest thing Izuku has faced in his life, but men like this have a desperate urge to make themselves feel bigger than those around them, and those urges, when unmet, can boil over into increasing desperate actions. Generally, it's best to avoid such escalation.

"All Might is an embarrassment," the man growls. "Letting you run around like this – it's absurd. When the time comes that you become a problem, know this: my Shouto will succeed where All Might failed."

"I don't understand," Izuku says, though he isn't being entirely honest. He certainly has suspicions about what Endeavor means, and he'd be confident enough to make an educated guess, but he's curious as to whether Endeavor will dare to elaborate. And dare Endeavor does.

"Shouto was born to surpass All Might, and he will not be so foolish as to assume an enemy dead without evidence. When the day comes that you follow in your father's footsteps, it will be *my son* who stops you. This battle will be the perfect opportunity for him to prove himself.

Don't disgrace yourself too quickly."

Izuku has to admit, he's surprised. He knows, of course, that the hero is bold – to put it kindly – or a bully – to put it more accurately. Endeavor throws his weight around unrepentantly, and there's no reason to expect children to be exempt from his power-hungry posturing, given how he treats his own children. Nevertheless, Izuku would have put this – threatening a fifteen-year-old in a public space filled with witnesses and heroes – beyond even Endeavor's hubris.

"Is that all?" Izuku asks blandly.

Endeavor narrows his eyes. "I see no reason to waste any more time with you." He pushes past Izuku, crossing too close through Izuku's space. Another intimidation tactic that Izuku doesn't bother with humoring, standing his ground even when the bubble of heat Endeavor wears like a second skin brushes uncomfortably against his skin, raising sweat beneath Izuku's uniform.

"I'm not my father," Izuku calls to the hero's retreating back. "And Todoroki isn't you."

Endeavor pauses but doesn't turn. His costume sticks tightly to his skin, and Izuku can easily see the twitch his statement elicits, rippling down the muscles of Endeavor's back. Izuku wonders if the reaction was bred from surprise or anger – or maybe even shame, if there's a speck of self-awareness in the man somewhere. Whatever he is feeling, Endeavor controls it quickly, moving on with a derisive scoff.

What a blind man. Izuku has a lot of feelings about Endeavor. Fear, certainly – Endeavor is a hero who cultivates fear to some degree in villains and civilians alike. But also anger, resentment, and contempt. Ugly feelings that Izuku usually tries not to entertain. Of course, Izuku isn't feeling any of those things, now. He is separate from them, and here, from his unbiased standpoint, he thinks he should probably add pity to the list. Todoroki Enji is such a *pitiful* man.

But there might still be some hope for Todoroki Shouto.

On account of his atypical upbringing, Shouto has formed some unusual associations. The world he lives in often looks different from

the worlds of his classmates. Shouto is aware of this, though the specifics of *how* his life has differed from others his age generally escapes him until someone goes out of their way to point out and explain a disparity to him. However, he is certain that most people don't consider ice to be *warm*.

It is, though. Shouto thinks he should be entitled to some authority on the subject, and he can say with confidence that ice is warm. When he was young, his mother would create little ice sculptures for him – those made him feel warm. Occasionally he'll make one for himself, and they're never the same, but they still evoke a similar feeling. Fuyumi can cause it as well, by laying cool hands over Shouto's heat-tender skin. And hypothermia – when everything is so cold the body starts to shut down – that's the most bone-deep warmth Shouto has ever felt.

Yes, ice is warm. And fire is cold.

Shouto thinks it must leech the heat out of things. That's why people with fire quirks always have such cold eyes. Endeavor, perpetually wreathed in flames, stares at Shouto, cold and uncaring, as if he is frozen someplace too far away for affection to thaw him. What Shouto can remember of Touya is cold and distant, and he disappeared practically overnight, like a figure wading into a snowstorm, leaving behind a cold room, cold bed, cold memories.

And Shouto – people call Shouto cold all the time. They think because he doesn't talk, that means he can't hear, but often times they don't even bother to lower their voices. They say he has cold eyes. He tries not to look in mirrors too often. He looks like his father, and he looks like his mother, and both of those resemblances are hard for him to actually look at, most days. But some days – some days he needs to see it. Those days, he leans over the bathroom sink, inspecting one side of his face and then the other. When he presses himself close to the mirror, looks himself in the eyes, Shouto likes to think that only one of them is cold, and it's not on the side everyone would assume.

Midoriya Izuku has cold eyes. Shouto doesn't know how he didn't notice earlier. Maybe at the USJ the coldness was covered by tears; maybe the heat of combat thawed them out during the cavalry battle. But now, standing on the other side of the field, Midoriya's eyes are unmistakably *cold*. Shouto can see the villain in this boy, far more than he could even when the class was actively under attack.

Shouto is going to win the sports festival. He decided as much ages

ago, after a long period of weighing his options to determine what outcome would infuriate his father the most. Approximately an hour ago, Shouto decided that he is going to win *this* match, especially. He will win and prove to everyone watching that fire is inferior to ice, that Shouto doesn't need his father's power, that his father's power is *nothing* in comparison to Shouto's own.

The instant the match begins, while the last ebbs of Present Mic's voice are still resonating around the stadium, Shouto attacks. Ice spreads from his right foot, propagating along itself, farther and farther, larger and larger, faster and faster. It creeps up his leg as well, overflowing, locking his knee in place as the joint freezes over. Midoriya watches the ice approach with cold, cold eyes, unafraid and unmoving.

In a moment, he is blocked from Shouto's sight by a still-growing spire of ice, and for that moment Shouto thinks he has won, as instantaneously as he had against Sero. There is only a fraction of a second, immeasurably minuscule, where Shouto believes the match is over, and he feels something hollow and numb that he can't put a name to. It is a horrible feeling, made all the worse by not knowing what it is or where it comes from, but Shouto hardly even suffers it before his misapprehension that he has won catches light and burns to a crisp.

There is a glow behind the ice, orange-yellow dancing through foggy blue. Then the air in the arena whips into a frenzy, hot and cold in dizzying turns as Shouto braces himself and brings up his arms to cover his face. Water drips, and steam hisses, and Midoriya stands, cold and blazing. Fire streams from his mouth, curls around his shoulders and arms, and Shouto can already feel the ghost of it against his skin, blistering and unkind.

Shouto shatters the ice along his leg with a sharp twist of his hips, regaining his full mobility just in time to roll to the side as Midoriya sends out a whip-fast tendril of flame. It scuffs against the ground where Shouto had been standing, blackening the dirt. Half the flame is smothered by the impact, but it is quickly replenished, flowing after Shouto like a serpent. It licks along his ankle; he kills it beneath a sheet of ice.

Ice can beat fire, Shouto knows. It's only a matter of quantity. Fire melts ice, but it can only melt so much so quickly. Shouto's first attack was sizable, but he can go bigger – will have to go bigger. He will end this quickly, overpower Midoriya in one fell swoop.

The next glacier he summons is larger than the first, nearly the size of what he managed in his match against Sero, when he wasted so much of his energy on an outburst that was ill-advised, in hindsight. The exertion leaves Shouto's leg once again frozen to the ground, frost crystalized along his arm and the edge of his mouth. His breath stabs like daggers in his lungs. The muscles of his right side feel brittle and stiff.

Again, Shouto thinks he has won. Again, he is wrong.

This time, the change in air pressure caused by the meeting of fire and ice is nearly enough to send Shouto out of the ring, if not for the hasty barrier he raises to brace against his back. His heels skid along the ground, pressed backwards with enough force that his body aches slightly in protest. The ice along his limbs cracks and flies away. And when the roar of the wind dies away and Shouto can look up without getting dust and ice and water in his eyes, Midoriya is somehow still in the ring.

He is crouched on the ground, hands flat to the earth as if he could grip the smooth surface of the field to anchor himself. His flames have all died away in the onslaught. Shouto forces himself to run. He feels sluggish and clumsy but closes the distance between them as quickly as he can. Midoriya is distracted, clearly recovering from Shouto's last attack, and Shouto would need to be a fool to let him have any room to breathe instead of pressing the advantage.

"You can't win this way," Midoriya says as Shouto draws near. He sounds slightly winded, but not desperate, not even taunting – he sounds matter-of-fact, simple confidence devoid of arrogance, as if he isn't bent over, nearly prone and completely defenseless, with not a wisp of fire to come to his aid.

Shouto's lip curls up in a sneer, and he swerves past Midoriya, boosting himself up with a pillar of ice so he can attack from above and behind. The ground crackles as Shouto punches it, a halo of jagged spikes rising around his fist where Midoriya was meant to be. Shouto pulls back, spins, tries to locate where Midoriya has dodged to – and then his feet are knocked out from underneath him. He tumbles to the dirt, uniform tearing and arm scraping against a shard of ice as he falls. Midoriya is on him in a second, a heavy weight on Shouto's chest that leaves him gasping for air.

"You're freezing," Midoriya says. "There's a limit to how much cold your body can take. But you already know that, don't you? Why don't

you fix it? All it would take is a little fire."

As if to demonstrate, Midoriya spits, a dense wad of flame landing with a sizzle next to Shouto's right ear, unfolding and dying against the dirt in only a second. There are blisters at the corners of Midoriya's mouth, Shouto realizes. Blisters along his mouth, and his hands, and his sleeves have been charred to black scraps of fabric that reveal the red, irritated skin of his arms. It makes Shouto feel ill.

"I will *never* use my left," he snaps. He twists beneath Midoriya, shoving his right hand against the other boy's face and letting frost spread from his fingertips. With a grunt, Midoriya leans back, and Shouto shoves him hard to the side, rolling out from underneath him and struggling to a stand.

"Because of your father?" Midoriya asks, somehow recovered and back on his feet before Shouto.

"You don't know what you're talking about." Shouto attacks again, a wave of ice following the gesture of his arm, but the movement is slow enough that Midoriya sidesteps without needing any fire to aid his defense.

"I know better than most," Midoriya says. "I know about bad fathers and bad quirks. I know about Endeavor. I even understand. At least some of it."

And Shouto forgets that he is stiff and tired. He forgets that his joints are protesting, forgets that his breath fogs the air with every exhale, forgets that his arm is aching and bleeding. All Shouto can think of is the *audacity*.

Midoriya thinks he *understands?* If he understood even a fraction of what Shouto has gone through, he wouldn't be standing here, so cavalier. There are things that can't be spoken of calmly – things like being *bred* for, being *weaponized, objectified,* things like being half a monster, things like railing against fate. The only people who speak calmly of such things are the people who *don't understand them*.

Shouto forgoes his quirk altogether to punch Midoriya Izuku in the face, but his arm is caught in a too-hot grip that spins him around and flings him to the side. Shouto barely stays on his feet, snarling as he staggers.

"But there's one thing I don't understand," Midoriya says. "Who are you trying to save?" Shouto narrows his eyes and ignores the question.

Conversation is a cheap tactic during battle, and he has already let Midoriya unbalance him enough. “Heroes are meant to save people. Your fire could help you do that.”

“Did my old man pay you off or something?” Shouto spits.

“I’m pretty sure Endeavor wants me dead. It’s not his fire that makes him a bad man, you know that, right?”

“Shut up!”

Surprisingly, Midoriya does. In a blink, he is in front of Shouto, silent as a ghost, and he sweeps Shouto’s legs out from under him again, grabbing him by the shirt collar before he can fall, and dragging him towards the closest boundary line. Shouto grasps at Midoriya’s arm, icing it as he tries to get his feet back under him. Midoriya is several inches shorter than Shouto, but he’s deceptively strong, easily maintaining control, even while Shouto grapples at him. Freezing both their feet to the ground, Shouto makes a last attempt to keep them both in bounds, but is countered with a stream of fire that melts the ice and brushes uncomfortably against Shouto’s shins.

Then, with a single swing of Midoriya’s arm, Shouto is out of bounds.

“We should go to Recovery Girl,” Izuku says as Midnight calls the match. “Can you stand?” He reaches down to Todoroki, who smacks the offer away with a cold, trembling hand. Pointedly not looking at Izuku, glaring at a random patch of ground, Todoroki heaves himself up, wavering for several long seconds as he tries to get his legs under him. Izuku hovers close by in case Todoroki falls, but doesn’t offer any more assistance, certain the other boy wouldn’t appreciate it.

In retrospect, Izuku doesn’t think he has handled this entire situation particularly well. Todoroki is obviously upset, which had never been Izuku’s goal. Perhaps it would have been better to leave the whole Endeavor situation alone until he had the capacity to be properly – sympathetic? tactful? – whatever quality it is that emotions impart on a conversation. Somehow, Izuku has ended up insulting Todoroki, or offending him, when all Izuku wanted was to help. And maybe satisfy some curiosity along the way.

Short term, Izuku doesn't much care if Todoroki is upset. In the long term, though, it's impractical to allow any tension to fester between them when Izuku and Todoroki will likely be classmates by this time next week. Not to mention that, a few hours from now, Izuku knows *he'll* be upset if Todoroki is. He wanted to help, and it's entirely possible that he's actively made things worse, instead, which is exactly the kind of thing Izuku would eat himself up over, normally.

"I'm sorry about what I said," Izuku offers, a blind attempt at damage control as he follows behind Todoroki, making a beeline out of the arena. Todoroki does not reply, walking quickly and slightly favoring his left leg. Izuku sighs, letting himself fall slightly behind Todoroki's longer strides.

Izuku is tired. He has used over a dozen quirks throughout the course of the sports festival, and while he has trained extensively with most of them, the emotional suppression quirk is a constant drain on his energy. He'll have to carefully manage his resources if he wants to have enough stamina to make it to the finals.

Next round he'll be facing either Shinsou or Monoma – he can't say with any certainty who is going to win that matchup, so he needs to be prepared for either outcome. Shinsou, with his easy-to-avoid quirk and seemingly subpar physical abilities, would be ideal. Izuku could likely defeat him fairly quickly without any quirk use at all. Monoma would be doable as well but his quirk could cause issues, especially if he tries to copy Izuku's own.

Another sigh, and Izuku reaches the infirmary, sliding quietly into the room and taking a seat on the unoccupied cot. Todoroki, already settled, glares at him briefly before sliding his eyes to the television, where commercials play while Cementoss repairs the arena for the upcoming match. Next to Todoroki, Recovery girl stands on a stool, looking over his injuries – a cut on his bicep, minor burns on the lower halves of his legs, some bruising – before smacking her lips against his cheek. She hops down from her stool, pushing it over to Izuku's bed with a click of her tongue.

"What have you done to yourself?" she scolds, grabbing one of his wrists with a gentleness that belies her tone.

"Nothing too bad."

"I'll be the judge of that. Get that shirt off, you'll need a new one anyway."

Obediently, Izuku shrugs his jacket off and tugs his shirt over his head. Both articles are worse for wear, burned and singed in a multitude of places. Underneath, his skin is red and splotchy, drawn into tight, irritated patches along his back and shoulders. The burns are the worse on his arm, shiny and hot. Blisters bubble up along his fingers, which don't bend quite as well as they should. Unfortunately, while Izuku has a resistance to heat, he doesn't have any *immunity* to it, and control large amounts of fire in such close quarters always ends up backfiring on him.

"Nothing too bad," Recovery Girl scoffs, leaving Izuku's bedside to bustle around her medical stores. "Second degree burns do qualify as *bad*, young man."

"They're mostly first degree," Izuku placates. Most of the burns along his torso are superficial at worst – he can hardly even feel them. Unimpressed, Recovery Girl gives him a dry look. Todoroki glances his way as well, gaze lingering over Izuku's hands before fixing back on the TV. Izuku smiles in his direction.

"I'll treat the worst of these," Recovery Girl says as she dumps an armful of supplies on the bed, "but the rest will have to heal the old-fashioned way."

Izuku shakes his head. "I just need them cleaned. I can't spare the energy. No bandages, either – I'll just burn them off in my next match. It would be counterproductive."

He meets Recovery Girl's narrow-eyed stare with a level one of his own. He doubts he is the first student to deny some degree of treatment during the sports festival, as much as he is sure she hates it. She clicks her tongue loudly but pulls a disinfectant from her pile of supplies without arguing.

"I keep telling Nedzu that you students are far to self-destructive over a silly little school event," Recovery Girl mutters to herself as she starts working on Izuku's hands. "All you children breaking yourselves apart for a medal and expecting me to put you together at the end. Ridiculous!" Louder, she adds, "You're staying here until your next match; I won't hear otherwise! If you're going to be a reckless fool with your injuries, you're going to stay where I can keep an eye on you."

"Alright," Izuku agrees easily. "Can you let Mic and Eraser know I'm down here?"

While Recovery Girl scurries into her office to report on Izuku's location, Izuku turns to Todoroki, who is still intently watching the TV. On screen, Monoma and Shinsou have just entered the arena, each greeted with uproarious applause that sounds like a formless rumble over the speakers.

Perhaps unwisely, Izuku breaks the silence, "I'm not sorry, actually. About what I said. I had a point."

"You shouldn't talk about what you don't understand," Todoroki says, not turning his attention away from the television. Outside of battle, his voice is flat and unreadable. A muscle in his jaw jumps.

"But I do understand. You think you have your father's quirk. You think using it means being like him, and you don't want to be like him."

"I don't *need* it," Todoroki tells the TV. "I'll become the number one without his power."

"It's *your* power," Izuku corrects patiently. A half smile twitches on his mouth. "It's not as if you stole it from him."

"I will *not* be like him."

"Then don't be. Be good, instead. You recognize me, don't you?" A pause, then Todoroki nods once, jerky and brief. "Then you should realize that I know a thing or two about power and all the bad things that can be done with it. But I'm trying to take something bad and do good things with it. You're doing *nothing* when you could be doing *good.* Todoroki–"

Izuku sits forward on the edge of his cot, leaning towards the other boy, staring hard at the clench and spasm of his jaw until Todoroki finally gives in and looks up. His expression is not so blank, now. It is intense and conflicted, and Izuku can't say exactly *what* Todoroki is thinking, but they are clearly things he has never thought before, thoughts he doesn't know what to do with.

"You are more than your father's son," Izuku says, for both their sakes. Todoroki's throat bobs as he swallows. Without a word, he turns back to the match on screen. Izuku stares for a moment longer before making himself comfortable, tipping his head back against the wall and letting his eyes fall shut. He'll need all the rest he can get between matches.

Chapter End Notes

CWs
Canon-typical violence + minor injury

Izuku: Todoroki and I have a lot in common. Maybe we should be friends.
Izuku: …How does making friends work?
Izuku: I could… kill his father for him?
Aizawa: NO.

Shouto: You said my father wants you dead?
Izuku: Oh, yeah. He wants you to kill me, actually.
Shouto: …Excuse me?

Next Chapter: Explosion – Part I
Update: Apr 22

Explosion - Part I

Chapter Notes

> Just to be safe, general CW for sports festival violence, blood, and injuries - but considering that canon has Midoriya serial-bone-breaker Izuku, it's nothing extreme
>
> Me, last week: Okay, here's the plan–
> My uterus: Oh? You have *plans??* Would be a shame if,,,
> something happened
>
> Oh well, Discord stuff
> Cloud: X X X
> Dev: X X
> Eggs: X
> Goat: X
> Roman: X X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hitoshi has spent enough hours staring at himself in the mirror to recognize an asshole when he sees one, and he had Monoma Neito clocked from the moment the blonde smiled that slow, lazy smile and smoothly arched an eyebrow in the short seconds before his face went blank under the influence of Hitoshi's quirk. The shit that comes out of Monoma's mouth now is only bonus confirmation for something Hitoshi already knew to be true.

"I'm here to put those 1-A stuck-ups in their place, so let's get this over with quickly, shall we?" the asshole drawls over Present Mic's introductions. He smiles, all mock benevolence, like Hitoshi should be grateful for getting to fight him at all. If he were more expressive, Hitoshi would sneer, and the temptation to do so deliberately is high, but he keeps his face bored and disinterested, gratified to see Monoma's fake smile distort slightly with the tightening at the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, you're not in 1-A?" Hitoshi asks flatly as the match is called to a start. "Sorry, I couldn't tell. You hero students all look the same to me, being stuck-up and all." As he speaks, Hitoshi strafes to the side, attempting to maintain distance between them without putting himself too close to the boundary lines.

“You know, I’ll admit that I’ve been looking forward to this fight, even though you’re only in gen-ed.”

“There’s that famous hero arrogance.”

As if Hitoshi hadn’t spoken, Monoma continues, “I’ve been curious since the cavalry battle. Made quite the fool of me, puppeting me around like that–”

“I doubt you need any help to make a fool of yourself.”

“–but I’m hardly going to withdraw because of that. No, I’d much rather return the favor.”

“And how are you planning to do that?” Hitoshi asks. He is already slightly out of breath from trying to prevent Monoma from getting in close range, and he hasn’t even been particularly successful in those attempts. Monoma keeps moving to intercept whatever path Hitoshi sets, leaving Hitoshi feeling frustratingly like a herded sheep, bleating at a brick wall.

Hitoshi’s quirk is *response* based. Hell if he knows how it works, but there is something about call and answer that gives him backdoor access into a person’s head, a connection that starts verbally, with the faintest snippet of conversation, and extends mentally. But Monoma, the self-important, aggrandized *asshole* apparently doesn’t deign Hitoshi worth speaking *to*. No, he talks to himself, monologuing like his thoughts are a gift to the world, and leaving Hitoshi scrambling without purchase against the smooth cage of Monoma’s skull, looking for a way in.

With a flurry of movement, Monoma gets in close. Hitoshi flinches to the side, a senseless, instinctual attempt to dodge whatever attack the other is planning. Regaining his feet after a moment of clumsy stumbling, Hitoshi brings his arms up in what might be some kind of guard – he’s pretty sure that’s a thing in martial arts, isn’t it? Monoma smirks. He is no longer advancing, standing a few feet away. His stance seems casual at first glance, but while Hitoshi takes advantage of the breathing room, he sees the firm way Monoma’s feet are planted, the way his hands hover by his hips, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

“Man, think of all the things you could do with this one,” he says, rolling his head back but keeping careful eyes on Hitoshi while he does. “What? Nothing to say?”

There is a gleam in Monoma's eyes as Hitoshi's lips part, and there is a disoriented moment where Hitoshi very nearly blurts something out – maybe a "what the hell are you on about?" or a "do you ever shut the fuck up?" – and then he snaps his teeth down, catching the tip of his tongue between them. The shadowy thing Monoma did in the last round, but has shown no sign of doing again; "returning the favor;" Present Mic had even said it, hadn't he? Copy cat.

It's a goddamned copy quirk.

Okay, so it's a copy quirk. To be on the safe side, assume Asshole has Hitoshi's quirk, and he knows how it works, and he plans to catch Hitoshi in the same net Hitoshi used against him for the cavalry battle, as some sort of poetic justice or something. Or maybe Monoma's just an *asshole* who gets his rocks off by turning people's abilities against them. Honestly, Hitoshi can't blame him, because he would probably do the same thing in Monoma's situation, except *wait* – Hitoshi can *totally* blame him, even if it's hypocritical, because Hitoshi is an asshole, too. So, really, *fuck Monoma,* and *what the fuck* is Hitoshi meant to do now?

"You should see your face," Monoma says, apparently too dignified to snicker but just as mocking. "Who's the fool, now?"

Hitoshi is panicking. He's panicking, and obviously that's not great for his thought process, but it feels a little bit like his senses have been dialed up to eleven, and he can see the exact moment Monoma decides that Hitoshi is just one pathetic joke, the moment where he stops taking Hitoshi even remotely seriously. Monoma's shoulders go slack, his weight shifts over one of his legs, his arms cross dismissively in front of him.

And Hitoshi, still panicking, throws himself forward and punches Monoma in the face. Something crunches. Definitely Monoma's nose; maybe Hitoshi's hand.

"Fuck!" Monoma curses loudly, staggering back a few steps. Blood drips into his palm as he brings a hand to his face, hissing. Hitoshi stares, dazed. His hand aches, fingers trembling as he tries to extend them. There's a cut on his pinky – probably from Monoma's teeth, he realizes. It's shallow, more of a scrape really, but he can't even feel the sting of it through the burn of his knuckles, like his bones have been replaced by live coals.

"You should see your face," Hitoshi says, words welling up without

conscious thought. Monoma does look ridiculous, though, if in a slightly gory kind of way – eyes wide, pale face contrasting with the vibrant red smeared over the lower half of his features. Hitoshi probably doesn't look much better, eyes just as wide, face just as pale, shadows beneath his eyes like smudged charcoal, cradling his fist against his chest like he can't believe what just happened.

"You *fucker*," Monoma spits. His condescending smile is gone, replaced by a scowl that peels his lips away from blood-stained teeth. "You broke my goddamned nose!" With his sinuses clogged with blood, the words come out muffled, and Hitoshi bites his cheek to keep himself from laughing.

Monoma pulls his hand away from his face, little droplets of blood flying from his fingertips to splatter against the dirt. He lunges forward, movement abrupt and coordinated enough that it catches Hitoshi off guard. Monoma grabs him by the collar of his jacket, hauling Hitoshi in close.

"Remember, you're the one who chose to do this the painful way."

Hitoshi scratches at Monoma's wrist with his good hand as the asshole winds his other arm back. Sunlight glints off the peaks of Monoma's knuckles, suddenly white-silver and blinding. Hitoshi cringes away, eyes clenching shut and head turning to the side as his shoulders hunch up to guard his ears. The punch hits him like a battering ram, a direct blow to the ridge of his cheekbone, setting off a burst of color behind his closed eyelids, a ringing in his ears. Hitoshi is not conscious of falling, but he knows when he lands on his injured hand, his weight pressing it into the ground, igniting the hot-coal pain, fire licking up his wrist.

"Shinsou," Midnight calls from the sidelines after a dizzy moment of recalibration, "can you continue?" His vision clears like ink bleeding color back into the world. He struggles back up onto his hands and knees, carefully keeping his weight off his bad hand.

Monoma huffs a stuffy sigh above him. "You did well to make it this far," the asshole says, voice once again controlled and patronizing. "But you're just not cut out to go farther. Any final words?"

Vitriolic words on the tip of his tongue, Hitoshi opens his mouth. Monoma's eyes glint. Copy quirk, right. He still has Brainwashing. So be it. Hitoshi rocks forward, placing the brunt of his weight on his injured hand, where the bones shift and grate and grind together

beneath his skin like a collection of molten knives.

“I’m not done yet,” he says, voice strained.

“Oh yes, you are,” Monoma responds with a predatory smirk.

And for half a second, Hitoshi can feel it, like a thick fog that tries to close around him from the inside out. But it is lit red-hot by the constant shifting pressure he has on his broken hand, and he clings to that feeling until the sharpness of it slices clean through the tether Monoma attempted to create between them.

At the same time, Hitoshi reaches out from within himself, seizing a grip on the light that flared to life in the back of his mind with Monoma’s last words, turning the tables in an instant. He grabs control and tells the connection very firmly that it *will not break*.

“Repeat after me, loudly” Hitoshi instructs, gritting his teeth as his head throbs. “I give up.”

“I give up.”

Hitoshi drops the connection immediately, reveling in the aghast look that spreads over Monoma’s face as Midnight snaps her flog. This time, Hitoshi does not bother to stifle his laugh, but it is quiet under the cheer of the crowd.

“Guess you’re just not cut out to go farther,” he says with false sympathy. The blood over Monoma’s face mostly conceals the extent of his embarrassed anger, but the red flush of the tips of his ears is unmistakable. Without a word, he spins, storming off the field with his neck stiff and head held defiantly high.

Hitoshi sits in the dirt, unsure for the moment if his legs will support him and unwilling to take the gamble. Above Midnight’s stage, the bracket comes back on screen, and Hitoshi’s line glows a brilliant gold as he advances to the next round. Hitoshi has made it to the semi-finals.

And so has Midoriya Izuku.

By the time the day is over, everyone will know exactly what happens

during the sports festival.

People don't even need to have watched the festival to know what happens during it. Certainly, many of them see it for themselves. Those lucky enough to have tickets see it as part of the massive cheering stadium crowd. Others watch live over a screen from the comfort of their couch or bed. Still more drag themselves home after a long day's work and pull up recordings as they unwind. The remainder may choose not to watch the festival at all, but for weeks the news of what happened will be everywhere.

Here what they will all say, here is what everyone will know:

They will know that Shinsou Hitoshi beats Monoma Neito, swinging the match in his favor at the last second. They will know that Shoji Mezo beats Asui Tsuyu, grabbing her by the tongue and flinging her out of bounds. They will know Bakugou Katsuki beats Iida Tenya, using Iida's speed against him to chase him over the line.

And if, for some reason, someone *doesn't* know these things, the confusion is easily remedied. A quick internet search will immediately answer any questions, settle any debates.

There is nothing to doubt. It's objective reality.

Except – everyone experiences reality just a little bit differently, don't they?

Yes, everyone will know exactly what happens during the sports festival. But they won't all know it the same exact way. Afterall, there are a million sides to every story – written and unwritten, read and unread, treasured and *burned*. If there is such a thing as an objective reality, no one lives in it.

Everyone will know that Shinsou Hitoshi beats Monoma Neito.

But only Aizawa Shouta and Yamada Hizashi know that Shouta leans forward in his seat when Shinsou enters the field, and Shouta doesn't even know that his husband knows, because Hizashi is kind enough not to tease about the display of interest, just this once. Only Todoroki Shouto and Midoriya Izuku know about the conversation they have while the match plays on a screen in the corner of the room, and both boys know different things about this conversation – Izuku speaking truths he has bled to learn and Shouto hearing hopeful absurdities, the sort he hasn't entertained in a decade. Only Shinsou Toshiyuki knows that he is watching clips of the festival between appointments, and

only he knows the duality of his own feelings, the hope for success – Hitoshi would be so much *happier* – the hope for failure – it would be so much *easier* – and the doubtful shame that wells inside him for being conflicted on the matter at all.

Everyone will know that Shoji Mezo beats Asui Tsuyu.

But only Asui Tsuyu knows that she doesn't mind losing, that she is happy with how far she has come, and that any disappointment she might have felt is tempered by the certainty that, back home, see has made her younger siblings proud. Only the Asui household knows the way the children, Samidare and Satsuki, kept home from school for the special event, shake each other by the arms in their excitement, shouting as their mother scolds them to keep their voices down, but only half-heartedly. Only Shoji Shika knows that tears well in her eyes as she lets the cheers for her son's victory wash over her, overwhelmed with relief-gratitude-joy, because people can be so cruel, but her baby – her kind, gentle baby – is carving a place for himself in the world and helping to make it a better place as he does.

Everyone will know that Bakugou Katsuki beats Iida Tenya.

But only Bakugou Katsuki knows that the victory makes his arms itch because it feels meaningless to him, because he is very suddenly not sure what he is fighting for, because things are different, knowing what he knows now – knowing that maybe, all this time, he hasn't known half as much as he thought. Only Bakugou Masaru and Bakugou Mitsuki know that their son is going to come home a different person, for better or worse, finally at a tipping point that they both know they probably should have pushed him to sooner. Only Iida Tenya knows that the entire fight was a charade, a joke, a waste of time, because while he was playing hero, trying his hardest to live up to his brother, Tensei was getting struck down, and now he might not live at all.

Everyone will know exactly what happens during the sports festival. Shinsou Hitoshi beats Monoma Neito. Shoji Mezo beats Asui Tsuyu. Bakugou Katsuki beats Iida Tenya.

And that's all anyone will ever say.

When Hitoshi went to the infirmary to have Recovery Girl patch him up, he resolutely ignored Midoriya. Midoriya, sitting placidly on one of the cots, occasionally chatting idly with Recovery Girl, seemed content to do the same. Now, Hitoshi can't avoid looking at Midoriya. Across the field, Midoriya looks back, intense enough that Hitoshi stares at the bridge of his nose rather than meeting his eyes.

Physically, neither of them are in great shape. All of Hitoshi's bones are back where they're meant to be, but his hand still throbs slightly when he bends his fingers, and Recovery Girl has given him firm orders to be gentle with it or risk undoing all her work. His face is in worse shape, healed to a mottled purple and blue bruise that spreads from below his left eye all the way down to his jaw, protesting at every touch, but the concussion he received from Monoma's steel-plated fist has been dealt with. Midoriya's arms are marbled with burns, shiny and wet under the sun, skin bubbling up along his fingers and the corners of his mouth, looking raw and exposed. He's worse off than Hitoshi is, Hitoshi would guess, except for the fact that Midoriya seems completely unaffected by his lingering injuries, while Hitoshi feels all kinds of uncomfortable with his own.

As if he needed another disadvantage in this fight.

Just for fun, let's count the number of ways Midoriya has a leg up on Hitoshi:

1. If he's been paying any attention at all to the matches so far, he has an idea of what Hitoshi's quirk is and how it works. Probably a good one, at that.
2. He seems stupidly stoic. He never did the other times Hitoshi ran into him, but now? Smooth as glass, Hitoshi can't get a read on him, which will make it that much harder to get a response out of him.
3. *He killed his father.*
    1. Which is horrifying and has had Hitoshi psyched out ever since his dumb ass overheard it to begin with.
    2. He has the skill and experience to *kill someone*. Skills and experience that Hitoshi can't even imagine because *what the fuck?*
    3. Possibly evil??? He cried a lot about it for someone evil, but also, well – murder. So, there's that.

Of course, there's the chance that the third issue could actually be used to Hitoshi's advantage. In fact, it's probably the best chance he has. He needs bait good enough that even someone like Midoriya –

stoic, already knowing the mechanics of Hitoshi's quirk – will take it. And given the way Midoriya *sobbed uncontrollably* while he told Bakugou – what he told him, it seems like the topic evokes a certain undeniable response.

Hitoshi imagines it. Hey, he could say. What was it like to kill your father? He wonders if hysterical sobbing would fulfill Brainwashing's activation requirements.

He feels a little sick, just thinking about it.

A lot of people would be surprised to learn that Hitoshi isn't really prone to moral dilemmas. With a quirk like his everyone always expects him to be up to no good – and if he's *not* up to no good, then certainly he must be *considering* it, at least. Come on, they all say, you can tell me. What's the worst thing you've ever used it for? Have you ever thought about doing *this?* And Hitoshi will smile and laugh awkwardly and then disengage as quickly as possible, because the answer is almost always no – he never thought about it until they asked. He never wanted to think about it. And why would he? He knew the difference between right and wrong, and *wrong* didn't become *right* just because he could get away with it.

See, Hitoshi likes to think he's a good person. No, not a nice one, he'd never claim that. He doesn't like people much, and the feeling is mutual. He's spiteful, contrary, and petty. An asshole among assholes. But you don't need to be *nice* to be *good.* Hitoshi wants to help people not hurt anymore, he wants to stop hurting along the way, and as for all the people who've caused him that hurt? Being allowed to live the life he wants would be more than enough retribution for him. If he gets to rub it in their faces a little, that would be a bonus, but he'll settle for being left alone. He thinks that makes him a good person. Or at least, not a bad one.

Hitoshi runs his tongue over the back of his teeth as he stares at Midoriya. *What was it like to kill your father?* Even silent, the words taste like bile.

Once, Hitoshi's father had sighed and told him, "Spite and a contrary disposition won't get you far in life."

And Hitoshi had sneered and replied, "Just wait and see."

Seems like he's finally found the limit. Even Hitoshi isn't spiteful or contrary enough to weaponize tragedy, trauma. Hitoshi has dreamed of being a hero his entire life. But he refuses to become a bad person

in order to do it.

Hitoshi takes a deep, shaky breath. Later, he will probably hang out in the alley next to his apartment with all the stray cats and cry about this. Now, he will at least go down fighting.

Midoriya moves as soon as the match begins. He's fast, so Hitoshi has to talk faster.

"Where did you even come from?" he asks, voice raising on a yelp as Midoriya enters his personal space almost immediately. "Woah, jesus christ, you're fast."

Midoriya closes his fist around the collar of Hitoshi's jacket, the same way Monoma did, the same way Midoriya did to Todoroki. Collars are safety hazards – Hitoshi will remember that if he ever gets to design a hero costume, though that's looking less likely by the second. A harsh yank sends him stumbling, and Midoriya tows him around as if Hitoshi isn't a half foot taller than him.

"Watch it! If you're going to manhandle me like this, you could at least introduce yourself. No? Not even a hello? Were you raised in a barn or something?"

Midoriya doesn't respond, doesn't acknowledge Hitoshi's words in any way, not even a twitch of his mouth or eyes. Resolutely, he drags Hitoshi towards the boundary line, and all Hitoshi's attempts to dig his heels in only serve to wear out the soles of his shoes.

Savagely, he digs his nails into the blisters on Midoriya's wrists and twists, ignoring the nauseating fluid that wells beneath his fingertips, warm and slippery, as the blisters pop. Midoriya hisses, grip loosening enough that Hitoshi manages to grab the jacket's zipper, tearing it down in one sharp movement, spinning as he jerks his arms out of his sleeves, graceless but fast and effective. Instinct tells him to backpedal, to get the *hell away*, but Midoriya will close any distance Hitoshi manages to put between them in an instant.

Last time he panicked, Hitoshi punched Monoma in the face, and that actually worked out quite well for him. At the very least, it was satisfying. Channeling the same frantic non-strategy, Hitoshi grabs the bottom of his jacket, still in Midoriya's hand, and pulls it over Midoriya's head.

And then – he holds on. Honestly, he didn't think much on next steps, and he's not quite sure what to do next, but Midoriya grunts, his head

and one arm tangled in the jacket, and this time Hitoshi didn't even break his hand in the process, which counts as some kind of success in his books.

"You're looking a little tied up," Hitoshi pants, throwing all his weight into keeping Midoriya restrained. "I'd get it if you wanted to call it quits. No hard feelings, promise."

Hitoshi's jacket bursts into flames.

Midoriya stumbles forward as Hitoshi stumbles back, falling to the ground as the zipper flashes like a scorching whip across his arm. Ash and embers and tattered fabric drift around them. Small sparks of flame eat at the tips of Midoriya's hair, but as Hitoshi watches, they float away like fireflies, joining the swirl of fire that surrounds Midoriya.

"It was nice while it lasted," Hitoshi says faintly. "Damn it. Fuck."

Midoriya looks at him, the most acknowledgement he has given so far to anything Hitoshi has said. Hitoshi laughs, and Midoriya gives him the moment, not attacking. Burns have spread across his face, a new blister rising on his cheek, freckles standing out oddly against the redness of his skin. His eyebrows are singed and asymmetrical, the tail of one burnt off.

"I'm jealous," Hitoshi admits, apropos of nothing. Maybe it's a last-ditch effort, maybe it's just something that needs to be said. Who knows. "Everyone has always told me that I have a villain's quirk. They say it with so much certainty that it's like they *want* me to become one. Like it doesn't matter that all *I* want is to be a hero. And you – you *literally* have a hero's quirk. Endeavor is the number two! All he does is make fire; you can actually *control* it. It's just – that's so fucking ironic."

Hitoshi, with his villain's quirk, striving to be a hero. Midoriya, with his hero's quirk, possibly a villain.

"It would almost be funny, if we weren't the butt of the joke."

Hitoshi blinks. It is the same higher-pitched-than-expected voice that surprised him when he first ran into Midoriya in the hallway last week, an even more surprising sound now, when Midoriya is fierce and flaming and so stubbornly silent. But that was definitely Midoriya's voice, and the connection blossoms at the back of Hitoshi's head waiting for him to grab hold and complete it. He does, of course

he does, and Midoriya's eyes, already so disconcertingly blank, fog over. Hitoshi holds on tight to his command, feels as the tether strains slightly on Midoriya's end, but it doesn't give.

Hitoshi doesn't know what changed. Maybe with Hitoshi prone on the ground, Midoriya thought he was defenseless. Maybe Midoriya's stunt with a face full of fire has somehow messed up his head. Maybe Hitoshi's glancing implication to Midoriya's villain background had unbalanced him enough to trick him into responding. Hitoshi doesn't know, and he can't bring himself to care.

"Walk out of bounds," he says.

Midoriya does.

Hitoshi laughs to himself. A finalist. He's moving on to the final round. Somehow, he managed to come out of his fight with Midoriya less injured than he did his match with Monoma, and now he's a finalist.

Here's to spite and a contrary disposition, he thinks, a giddy toast in his head. They haven't failed him yet.

Everyone will know exactly what happens during the sports festival. Ask anyone and they'll agree. Shinsou Hitoshi beats Monoma Neito. Shoji Mezo beats Asui Tsuyu. Bakugou Katsuki beats Iida Tenya.

Shinsou Hitoshi beats Midoriya Izuku.

That's all anyone will ever say.

Except there are a million sides to every story. Doesn't it seem a shame to leave so many untold?

Everyone will know that Shinsou Hitoshi beats Midoriya Izuku.

But only Shinsou Hitoshi knows that he didn't even have to use his trump card, that he won without resorting to the nuclear option, that he moved that one step closer to fulfilling his dreams without compromising his own idea of what it means to be a good person. Only Aizawa Shouta knows that he was rooting for Shinsou in the back of his head, because he has a soft spot for underdogs – secret or

not so secret depending on who you ask – and as much as Izuku needs help and support to build confidence, his capability has never been under question. Only Bakugou Katsuki knows that the festival might as well have ended right there with that match, because none of it matters anymore, not with Deku out of the running, because he was the only challenge on the bracket, the only one who has ever made Katsuki feel *weak* and without fighting Deku at the end, without beating him, there's no way Katsuki can show everyone how *strong* he really is. Only Shigaraki Tomura knows that it's all a sham, because the boy standing on screen used to stand by his side and Izuku could destroy each and every one of them – could and would, leave others to clean up the throats he slits – and Tomura knows that there's no such thing as heroes and villains, not really, all just people who hurt other people, violence bred from violence until death is the only language everyone can understand.

And only Midoriya Izuku knows that there was never a way for him to win, not really, because there's no black and white in his world, and when everything is shades of grey, sometimes even a victory can look like a loss.

Shinsou Hitoshi is surprising.

That's what Izuku thinks as he claws at the fabric covering his face with his free hand – his other, still fisted in the collar of the jacket that is now restraining him, is caught next to his ear, and his shoulder strains uncomfortably if he tries to free it. This is a resourcefulness that Izuku wasn't expecting, though it's nice to see, since it adds some depth to Shinsou's skillset, that seems otherwise one-dimensional. So far, he'd been relying solely on his quirk, and this display of adaptability implies he has more potential than Izuku had begun to suspect.

Izuku still hesitates to call Shinsou clever or particularly strategic. He pulls the jacket tight to Izuku's face, yanking back against it as Izuku struggles to free himself, but he lacks follow-up. Restraining Izuku like this is ultimately useless on its own, only the first of what should be several essential steps if Shinsou actually plans to win.

"You're looking a little tied up," Shinsou says, voice close to Izuku's ear but muffled by fabric and his own breathlessness. "I'd get it if you

wanted to call it quits. No hard feelings, promise."

He's trying, Izuku will give him that much, but he's using the same old tricks that have already proven ineffective. It's a weak attempt to garner a response – trivial words, like un-baited hooks. Izuku feels no compulsion to banter with someone in the middle of a fight, especially when he knows the consequences of doing so. Did Shinsou manage to catch Aoyama and Monoma with so little effort?

Another sharp pull on the jacket cranes Izuku's neck into an uncomfortable angle, and he lets himself go slightly limp to relieve the stress. This is getting them nowhere. He sighs, clicks it in the back of his throat, lets his breath come out hot and suffocating. There is a moment, before fabric gives way as fibers disintegrate into ash, where Izuku feels like he is boiling, and then he stumbles forward, unbound. The air, heated into wavering lines by the flames dancing around him, feels blessedly cool against his flame-tender face. Behind him, Shinsou makes a bitten off sound of pain, falling to the ground with a thud that reverberates up Izuku's ankles. Izuku pulls his new fire into unruly organization, gathering the sparks flitting through the air into a continuous stream that circles around him.

"It was nice while it lasted," Shinsou says, seemingly to himself. His voice, soft and faint, grows frustrated as he adds, "Damn it. Fuck."

Izuku turns back to face him. Shinsou sits on the ground, long legs sprawled in front of him, propped up on one hand. The other, the one Recovery Girl tutted over when he visited the infirmary after his match with Monoma, hovers limply in front of his abdomen. A lividly red welt stands out against his skin, starting near his wrist and curving back around his arm, nearly to his elbow. He laughs, strange and strained.

"I'm jealous," Shinsou says, a sharp-edged confession. "Everyone has always told me that I have a villain's quirk. They say it with so much certainty that it's like they *want* me to become one. Like it doesn't matter that all *I* want is to be a hero."

Shinsou looks tired. Angry, too, but the anger is like a faded, threadbare thing – an old blanket that is too worn away to keep him warm anymore. The tiredness, that's more like stone – heavy and lasting, changed only in the tiny, unnoticeable increments of erosion. His eyes spark and dim, challenge and resignation in turns.

And Izuku remembers Aizawa Shouta.

It feels like a lifetime since Izuku has thought of Aizawa Shouta, even though it's only been a couple of weeks since he first learned the name. So much has changed since then, and now Izuku thinks more of Eraserhead than the boy who became the hero. But it was Aizawa Shouta who brought Izuku here, Aizawa Shouta who made himself a hero when the world didn't want him to be one, who fought and defied and preserved.

Shinsou Hitoshi is a bit like Aizawa Shouta. He's not as skilled – at least, not yet – and he relies far too much on his quirk, where Aizawa Shouta always knew that his greatest strength was skill. But even beaten down, Shinsou is fighting back. Writing his own story.

Shinsou is more like Aizawa Shouta than Izuku could ever hope to be.

"And you," Shinsou continues, swallowing bitterly around the words, "you *literally* have a hero's quirk. Endeavor is the number two! All he does is make fire; you can actually *control* it. It's just," he laughs without humor, "that's so fucking ironic."

A hero's quirk. If only Shinsou knew, Izuku thinks wryly.

There is nothing heroic about him, especially not the Frankenstein amalgamation of stolen quirks that he is using to put on a show. Izuku has fooled them all so well – the audience members who are cheering for him from the stands, Aoyama and Tokoyami who want to eat lunch with him, Eraser and Mic who let him sleep down the hall, Shinsou who doesn't know the half of it.

Irony – a state of affairs opposite to what one would expect. Why should Izuku get a second chance when Shinsou Hitoshi hasn't even gotten his first? Izuku is trying to be *good*, isn't he? If he wins here, he'll be adding Shinsou's future onto the long list of things he has stolen. Nothing good about that.

"It would almost be funny," Izuku says, because irony is meant to be amusing, even if it's not this time, "if we weren't the butt of the joke."

The surprise in Shinsou's eyes is blatant, but he doesn't hesitate. He has Izuku under his control in less than a second.

Brainwashing is a fuzzy grey space. It is a fog so dense that it cradles Izuku, supporting his limbs, filling his eyes and nose and ears. It is even better than the emotional suppression quirk. Nothing to do, no responsibilities. Just a hazy-warm embrace, like falling asleep in the backseat of a car on a long drive, knowing your destination will come

to you. Izuku can see why people hate it so much, after the fact. Some must find it terrible, to have your agency taken away from you between one moment and the next, and then to find the violation of your will *comforting*. Izuku doesn't mind it.

He presses back against the fog around him, and as soft as it was, it resists the pressure, solidifying around him. Curiosity satisfied, Izuku relaxes, allows himself to drift in this welcoming non-space.

"Walk out of bounds," Shinsou says, and Izuku is vaguely aware that he does.

He comes to on the other side of the boundary line, with the crowd cheering around him. Not cheering *for* him this time. Shinsou sits on the ground still, eyes shining, shoulders shaking with a laugh that Izuku can't hear. It's a nice moment – Izuku will remember it fondly, as soon as proper fondness is something he is capable of. For now, he nods to Midnight and makes his way to exit the stadium, leaving Shinsou to revel in his victory, the surreal joy of seeing dreams come true.

Shinsou deserves it.

Chapter End Notes

> Normally I don't like to write the same events from multiple perspectives, but the Izuku vs Hitoshi battle is peak unreliable narrator, so I wanted to have fun with it. Hopefully their view of events is different enough that it's not redundant. I'm just here to have a good time.
>
> Also, I'm trying to wrap the sports festival up within the next couple of parts, so RIP Shoji vs Tsu and Iida vs Bakugou, but they're not actually important.
>
> Hitoshi: Hello, it is I, your local asshole
> Monoma: Let's finish this fight quickly, I don't want to waste my time with someone in gen-ed
> Hitoshi: Never mind, you are clearly more worthy of the title
>
> Discord: Someone should punch Monoma for upsetting Dark Shadow
> Hitoshi: I've got you, fam
>
> Hitoshi: Hell yes! I beat Midoriya!! Fucking eat it, I'm gonna be a hero!!

Literally everyone who knows Izuku: What? How did you - that doesn't make any sense
Izuku: Shhhh, let him have this

Next chapter: Explosion – Part II
Update: May 6

Explosion - Part II

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is on the slightly longer side of average because we're wrapping up the sports festival, right here right now. That's right – we're finally done. It's only been,,, over 50k words wtf
>
> On a related note, the sports festival is the second of about five major story arcs in IGG, and while those arcs will vary in length (hopefully the sports festival is the longest of them? but ahaha I am first and foremost a Wordy Bitch), that gives you some idea of where we are and how much we have to go. No one is more astounded, horrified, and intimidated by this knowledge than I am.
>
> Memes from Cloud, an actual goddess, who owns my very heart and soul
> X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta has watched enough sports festivals to know how they go. He's gotten predicting them down nearly to a science, especially when his own students are involved. This year's festival has certainly been more eventful than most, what with Izuku and Shinsou Hitoshi both stirring the pot and disrupting the usual status quo, but with both those wildcards on the sidelines, the match between Bakugou and Shoji isn't likely to contain yet another twist. Shouta is sure enough of this that he doesn't actually bother to watch the fight – he'll review the recordings later, in case they reveal anything for him to address with either of the boys in training, but he's relatively certain that he won't be missing anything by not watching the matchup live.

Instead, he exchanges a look with Hizashi and heads for the infirmary, where he's sure to find his resident problem child.

Approaching the doors, Shouta hears Izuku ask, "Could your quirk regrow my eyebrows?" Apart from sounding vaguely sleepy, the kid's voice holds only a reserved curiosity, apparently completely oblivious the frustrated exasperation he has once again awoken in Shouta. Oblivious or uncaring – in Izuku's current state, it's hard to say which. Shouta allows himself a moment to lean against the wall next to the door, listening to the exchange within.

“I wouldn’t even if I could,” Shuzenji replies, flat and unamused.

“I wonder what the prerequisite is. You speed up the body’s natural healing processes, but why not any others? Why my skin and not my eyebrows?” Izuku mutters something to himself, and Shuzenji clicks her tongue over his indistinct words.

“Well, that’s the way it is. I’ll fix your injuries, but when you burn off your eyebrows, you have to live with the consequences. Unless you have a quirk of your own that will do the trick?”

Izuku hums. “I have a quirk that lets me grow flowers from my hair follicles,” he offers thoughtfully. “But I don’t really want daisies for eyebrows. Some kind of grass could probably work, but the quirk only grows *flowers*. I’m not sure why, since a blade of grass is made up of the same components and arguably far simpler, but–”

“You’ll just have to wait it out, then,” Shuzenji interrupts. “Maybe after three months of looking like a fool, you’ll think twice before setting yourself on fire.”

“Does it really look that bad?” Izuku asks.

“Yes,” Shouta answers as he shoulders the door to the room open.

Truthfully, Shouta notes as he looks Izuku over, it doesn’t look that bad at all, even on a superficial level. Shuzenji has already healed the burns on Izuku’s face, leaving only the damage to his eyebrows. The tail of his left eyebrow has been burnt off entirely, but the remaining hair just looks marginally more scraggly than before. Shouta expected far worse, but it wouldn’t do for him to say as much, when Izuku would think that meant he could set his *head on fire* without any kind of lasting consequence.

Granted, the rest of Izuku isn’t in as fine shape as his face. Shuzenji likely prioritized healing the injuries there. She is wrapping his arms past the elbow, the mottled red-pink of his skin looking all the more startling as it disappears beneath pristine white bandages.

“Eraser,” Izuku greets, unsurprised by Shouta’s sudden appearance. “You don’t need to check up on me; I’m fine.”

“‘Fine,’” Shuzenji scoffs. “Thanks to all my hard work, maybe.” She turns to Shouta, hands on her hips. “I’ve healed the second-degree burns, but left most of the first-degree alone, for now. I’ll take care of the rest on Monday, or you can leave them to heal naturally. At the

moment, all he really needs is rest." Under her breath, though still audible, no doubt intentionally, she adds, "And a sense of self-preservation."

"I'm perfectly preserved," Izuku counters, argument weakened by the yawn that splits it. He rubs his eyes, fingers skipping up briefly to trace along the missing tail of his eyebrow. Shuzenji shakes her head, giving Shouta a pointed look before heading into her office.

"I really am fine," Izuku assures, folding one of his legs out of the way as Shouta takes a seat on the edge of his cot.

"Good," Shouta says. And it is a relief, but Shouta already knew the kid was at least mostly okay, and it wasn't Izuku's safety that drove Shouta to hunt him down. Straight to the point, he asks, "Are you going to try to pretend that you didn't throw that match?"

Izuku blinks. "No?"

"No, you're not going to pretend? Or no, you didn't throw the match?"

"No, I'm not going to pretend, I guess."

"You *guess*?"

"Well, it seems pointless to pretend. But I also wasn't going to bring it up. It didn't think it was a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" Shouta parrots incredulously. "Kid, *why* did you throw that fight?"

"Shinsou deserved to win," Izuku says simply, shrugging.

Shouta inhales deeply through his nose, trying to follow the logic that leads to Izuku making such an absurd statement with all the confidence of a known fact. There is a silent implication – Shinsou deserved to win; *Izuku didn't* – and it weighs heavily on Shouta, but he doesn't question it. He already knows exactly how that line of inquiry would end. That particular misconception will only be cured with time. Time and therapy – Shouta will have to be sure to mention this incident to Izuku's doctor before their next appointment.

"If he deserved to win, he would have won. Handing him the match is the exact opposite of him having earned it."

"Sometimes there's more to deserving than earning."

“What about Shinsou?” Shouta asks. “Do you think *he’ll* feel like he deserves it, when he finds out?”

Izuku frowns. “I don’t see why he would find out. Are you going to tell him?”

“No,” Shouta admits. He shudders to imagine getting that deeply involved in student business, even if he’s personally responsible for one of those students. “But if you aren’t prepared for what happens when someone learns you did something, you should at least consider not doing the thing at all.”

“I did consider it. And then I decided it was the best thing to do.”

Shouta sighs, shuffling until he is sitting across from Izuku, cross-legged at the foot of the bed, leaning against the footboard. Izuku blinks back at him, placid and unconcerned. Turning off the emotional repression quirk will be terrible, Shouta is sure – in fact, he’s already planning to ask Nemuri to be present in case the kid needs to be sedated – but he is looking forward to parting ways with this Twilight Zone version of Izuku.

“Explain to me,” Shouta says, more demand than request. “Why did Shinsou deserve to win?”

Izuku thinks for a moment, then nods to himself. “Shinsou and I both have ‘villainous’ quirks. I’ve always thought it was ridiculous to classify quirks that way, but all the people who say things like that about people like us… I’ve proved them right.” Shouta purses his lips, but doesn’t interrupt, shooting Izuku a warning look that has no effect on him. “Shinsou can still prove them wrong. He deserves a chance to do that. He’s never given into the pressure or scorn of the people around him.

“I know it ruins the rehabilitation plan a little, but I think it’s for the best. I don’t belong in the hero course, especially not over someone like Shinsou. This way, he can transfer.”

Shouta’s chest aches slightly to hear Izuku’s thought process, the way he condemns himself so dispassionately. Insecurities so deeply ingrained they transcend emotion, scratches on the lens through which Izuku views the world, falsehoods written in permanent marker.

“That’s illogical,” Shouta says tiredly when Izuku is clearly finished speaking. Izuku cocks his head. “Problem child – how many seats are

open in 1-A?"

"Two," Izuku answers instantly. "Mineta Minoru was expelled on the third day of term and Nishioka Kin's parents pulled him out of UA after the USJ attack." Shouta waits expectantly, and after a moment, Izuku grasps what he's getting at, only saying, "Oh."

"Exactly. You didn't need to let Shinsou win to give him a chance to transfer. As for your own transfer – I have no doubt that Nedzu will proceed as planned."

"It's still better this way," Izuku decides a second later. Shouta resists the urge to groan, once again listening patiently for the kid's justification. "The higher Shinsou places, the better his chances are. He doesn't have Nedzu scheming for him."

"No," Shouta corrects sharply. "His chances are unchanged. Transfers to the hero course are done entirely at staff discretion. The sports festival provides students with the opportunity to catch a teacher's attention – and Shinsou has had mine since the cavalry battle. He could have lost in his first match, and I still would have approached him. Coming in first, second, or third doesn't matter. All you did was compromise your integrity. *And* Shinsou's."

After a long pause, Izuku admits, "I didn't consider that."

"I know," Shouta sighs. "Learn from this – consider it next time. Next time you want to do something for someone, ask yourself if it even needs doing. And consider that helping someone else doesn't always have to involve hurting yourself."

Izuku nods, a pensive frown marring his face. He looks away from Shouta to the TV in the corner. A single glance is enough to reveal that Bakugou has the clear upper hand, overwhelming Shoji with bright bursts of light and noise.

"Katsuki's going to be upset," Izuku says. An explosion on screen, unnecessarily forceful, agrees with him. "I told him I would see him in the finals."

Shouta leans forward, bringing one of his casts down on Izuku's head, just hard enough to catch the kid's attention. Shouta glares at him, keeping Izuku's head in place with his arm.

"Focus on yourself," he orders. Izuku nods, rubbing his scalp lightly when Shouta releases him. Shouta locates the television's remote on

the small table between the two cots, turning the screen off just as Bakugou secures his victory.

Be *selfish*, Shouta wants to say. Help *yourself*. Fuck all the other. Not everyone needs to be a hero. There's nothing wrong with being the one to need saving.

Of course, Shouta doesn't say any of that because the kid won't understand it. Not yet. Another reason he shouldn't have been participating in the festival to begin with. Izuku is so eager to give away pieces of himself without taking anything in return, like he doesn't realize that his time, his energy, his *spirit*, are all limited resources.

Civilians will say that good heroes are willing to make sacrifices. They're not wrong, but like with most aspect of the hero industry, they also don't see the full picture of things. Good heroes are willing to make sacrifices; *great* heroes know when *not to.* As a direct result, the primary difference between good heroes and great ones is how long they live.

Come Monday, Izuku will most likely be seated in class 1-A, one step closer to being a good hero. And he will be good – as far as Shouta's concerned, that's a foregone conclusion. But it's still up to Shouta to make sure the kid lives long enough and stays whole enough to become a great one.

Behind the scenes of the sports festival, there's an unlisted match being fought only in Hitoshi's head. Midoriya Izuku versus Bakugou Katsuki – who's scarier? Let's see what the participants have going for them.

In one corner – Midoriya. Definitely not what you'd expect from a finalist in a fight like this – short, fluffy hair, huge eyes, smattering of freckles, overall just very green. Cute, in a simple, woodsy kind of way. Don't judge a book by its cover though, folks – Midoriya killed his dad. That's right! Killed – as in murdered – his dad – as in his own fucking father. That's a pretty big point in his favor – or is it a point against him? A point in the *definitely terrifying* column. He's also powerful and ruthless. Admittedly the intimidation factor of those traits pales somewhat in comparison to the patricide bit. Keep in

mind, though, Midoriya cried – like, a *lot* – about that whole murder thing, which might not bring anyone back to life, but it does make Midoriya slightly less terrifying in Hitoshi's books. And of course, Hitoshi has already beaten Midoriya, an important factor to consider.

In the other corner – Bakugou. Now he's what you'd expect to see in this competition – spiky hair, perpetual scowl, red eyes to match. Bit of a stereotypical thug, really, with exactly the shitty manners you'd associate with that sort of person. This is a book you *can* judge by its cover – one look tells you the whole story, and Hitoshi's not going to lie, that story is pretty intimidating. But hey, at least there are no nasty surprises hiding in the pages. Bakugou is also powerful and ruthless. In fact, he seems to be ruthless, not just in the *I'll do what it takes to win* way, but in the *I don't care if anyone gets hurt* way. To Hitoshi's knowledge, Bakugou hasn't actually killed anyone, but honestly, Hitoshi wouldn't be surprised it that knowledge proves to be incorrect or outdated somewhere down the line. And, worst of all, Bakugou is standing in front of Hitoshi *right now* because Hitoshi hasn't actually beaten him yet.

So, in summary, Midoriya is a murderer, but only a dubiously cold-blooded one, who Hitoshi has already overcome. And Bakugou is only dubiously a murderer, but certainly cold-blooded, who still has a chance to clear up all of that dubiousness by killing Hitoshi on national television.

Bakugou, Hitoshi thinks as their match begins. Ding, ding, ding – he's the fucking winner. Bakugou is definitely more terrifying. Because despite everything, as much as Hitoshi had thought Midoriya was going to kill his dreams during their match, he had never actually thought that Midoriya was going to kill *him.* Contrary to that, the *first* thing Hitoshi thinks when Bakugou runs at him is: holy shit, he's going to fucking kill me.

Hitoshi takes an explosion to the chest, a percussive force of brittle, dry heat, right against his sternum. He hits the ground and rolls, pathetic and clumsy, feeling each bump on a three second delay as his brain tries to catch up. Still in bounds, but disoriented and prone and thoroughly *out matched*.

"What a fucking joke," Bakugou spits as he stalks towards Hitoshi, threatening and slow in stark contrast to the blinding speed he used to deliver his initial blast. "Get up, fucker! You beat shitty Deku, now give me a fight worth having!"

“Who the hell is Deku?” Hitoshi asks, forcing the words out as he levers himself back onto his knees. Halfway to standing, Bakugou kicks him back down. An unhinged sneer pulls as his face, eyes red and glinting like something feral.

“Pathetic,” Bakugou says as Hitoshi curls an arm around his ribs. “This is how I’m meant to win?” Bakugou leans down, snags Hitoshi by the sleeve, and drags him to his feet, barely allowing him to catch his balance before shoving him a few steps back. Luck and divine mercy are the only things that keep Hitoshi up.

“Fight back,” Bakugou demands. “Prove that it wasn’t a fucking fluke you got this far.”

“It wasn’t,” Hitoshi snaps back. “You damned hero brats, you think you’re hot shit just because you blew up some robots? Think some pretty little fireworks are enough to–”

Hitoshi’s ear rings as Bakugou cuffs him, a pop and a crackle along the side of his head, a jagged-bright flash of orange in his peripheral vision. The blow isn’t nearly powerful enough to knock Hitoshi back down, only stumbling him a step to the side. He shakes his head, meeting Bakugou’s glare with an equally intense one.

“You can’t even throw a proper punch,” Bakugou mocks, still not enough of a response for Hitoshi to take hold of. “You’re a fucking joke, except I’m not *fucking laughing,* dipshit.”

Hitoshi clenches his bandaged fist, tendons creaking slightly in protest. He swings forward, aiming for Bakugou’s face – and even if he breaks his hand again, it will be worth it, so long as he takes Bakugou’s nose down with him. Bakugou catches the punch, fingers closing into the grooves between Hitoshi’s knuckles, smoking faintly. Spinning on his heels, Bakugou tosses Hitoshi back to the ground. Hitoshi lands on his hip, panting and trembling.

“Get up,” Bakugou growls.

“You know what? *No,* I don’t think I fucking will.”

Flopping onto his back, Hitoshi narrows his eyes against the glare of the sun, ignoring the way Bakugou hisses and spits as adamantly as he ignores the smarting of his own pride. If Bakugou wants to toy with him, then Hitoshi just won’t play. Beating Bakugou might be beyond what Hitoshi is capable of – especially exhausted, head and body aching, quirk already revealed – but pissing Bakugou off while he

loses is perfectly within Hitoshi's wheelhouse. It's not nearly as satisfying as actually winning, but there's some compensation in Bakugou's mounting frustration, in refusing to give him what he wants.

Bakugou grabs him again, but this time Hitoshi ragdolls petulantly, going limp and heavy. His shoulder aches, all his weight suspended there by Bakugou's grip on his arm, but the smug pleasure Hitoshi feels at Bakugou's barked curse makes the discomfort worth it.

"Stand up," Bakugou demands, shaking Hitoshi. "Fucking fight me!"

"Oh, but I'm so pathetic," Hitoshi laments, dramatically lulling his head back. Bakugou snarls, a deep subvocal sound, and when he goes to shake Hitoshi again, Hitoshi grabs hold of his wrist, squeezing as hard as he can. "Why don't you *finish the fucking job?*" Hitoshi asks, hauling himself up to bring their faces close together.

Bakugou's eyes widen, lips twitching where they are pulled back from his teeth, going pale as the blood leaves his face. His grip on Hitoshi's arm, bruise-tight moments before, abruptly goes slack, and Hitoshi crashes back to the ground, nearly dragging Bakugou with him until the other manages to jerk his own wrist out of Hitoshi's grasp. Looking less like something feral and more like something *cornered*, Bakugou slides his foot back a half step before catching himself, tensing in place.

"That's what people are meant to do to villains, isn't it?" Hitoshi asks from the ground, soft in the sudden silence. He can hear it in his own voice, an unsettling note of almost giddiness, a sadistic excitement at having caught Bakugou off guard and reduced him to pale, wordless staring.

Finally, Hitoshi has found an outlet for that conversation he overheard – that horrible, horrible conversation, the deadliest ammunition he has ever laid his hands on. Not against Midoriya, no, because Hitoshi never wanted to break anyone to pieces. After all, he's not a bad person. Using it against Bakugou, though? Bakugou, who pleaded, *begged* for Midoriya to stop crying – Bakugou, who couldn't face the reality that *he* had dragged kicking and screaming into the light?

Well, Hitoshi may not be a bad person. But he'd never claim to be a *nice* one.

"Or would you rather I do it myself?" Hitoshi asks, slow, deliberate. Almost sweet, if not for the bitter aftertaste. Bakugou snaps like a

rubber band pulled past its limits.

“Shut up!” he screams, launching himself forward. He descends on Hitoshi like a pack of wolves, and Hitoshi allows it – allows Bakugou to throw himself through the space between them, allows him to straddle Hitoshi’s chest and grab him by the collar, allows him to pull his fist back. All the while, Bakugou shouts, “Shut up! Shut the fuck up! What do you know, where did you hear that?! I’m going to wipe that shitty smirk off your smug fucking face!”

And when Bakugou’s knees are firmly planted on the ground next to Hitoshi’s ribs, Hitoshi reaches down the path Bakugou is unwittingly forming with his words and takes control. Bakugou’s face goes blank; his muscles, all wound tight, relax. If Hitoshi had grabbed him any sooner, while he was still moving, Bakugou likely would have tripped or stumbled, breaking the connection as soon as it could form, and Hitoshi had no desire to try to push his luck a second time. His head aches fiercely, protesting in sharp stabs that make Hitoshi’s vision pulse slightly, dimming intermittently around the edges in a way that can’t mean anything good.

“Go out of bounds,” Hitoshi orders.

Woodenly, Bakugou stands. He moves slowly, and Hitoshi can feel him struggling, like a bird beating its wings against the inside of his skull. A bird with blades for feathers, maybe. Blood beads from Hitoshi’s nose, hot and viscous, tracing a path down the side of his cheek, pooling into his ear. He is so fucking tired, and he is so fucking close.

“Quickly,” Hitoshi gasps. “As fast as you can.”

Bakugou’s hands light up, and Hitoshi flinches into the dirt, closing his eyes and bracing for pain. His ears ring. The ground seems to sway and rock underneath him.

“Bakugou Katsuki is out of bounds! The match – and this year’s sports festival – go to Shinsou Hitoshi!”

Well, Hitoshi thinks hazily, what do you know? That’s his name.

He won.

He lost.

Zombie Eyes, that scrawny gen ed fucker who couldn't hack it for the hero course, whose eyebags were bigger than his biceps – *he* won. Katsuki, who was stronger, smarter, better trained – he fucking *lost*.

In the middle of the field, Eyebags is flat on the ground, eagle spread. One of his arms raises, forms a weak fist in the air, and then flops back down, falling still. Pulse thundering in his ears, Katsuki strides forwards, long steps carrying him back over the boundary line – Bakugou Katsuki is out of bounds – as Midnight jumps down from her stage.

"Stay over there," she calls as she kneels down at Eyebags side. When Katsuki takes another step, she levels him a warning look. "Bakugou, stay where you are."

He stops, sucking his teeth as he glowers to the side. Something butts into the back of his thigh, accompanied by a soft beep. The dome-shaped head of a med bot greets him when he turns, a small red light at the top blinking regularly. It crawls forward an inch, bumping into him with another beep.

"Go around, asshole," he grunts as he steps to the side, allowing the machine to wheel past him, followed by a second bot, the two keeping a stretcher propped up between them.

"Hey sweetie," Midnight greets as the bots roll to a stop. "Could you get me a cup of water?" Another beep, chirpier than the one it used on Katsuki, and a panel opens in the thing's chest, dispensing a cup and filling it quickly. "Thanks, you're a real doll." Midnight takes the small cup, instantly dumping it over Eyebags head.

He splutters, jerking part way upright as water drips over his jawline and plasters little chunks of his hair against his forehead. Groaning, he collapses back again, pressing a hand to his ribs and mumbling something whiny. The med bot whistles cheerfully.

"Oh good," Midnight says, her grin too pleased to be kind, "you were only a little unconscious. You're not done yet – you've still got a medal to claim, Mr. Winner. How about we get you to Recovery Girl, hmm?"

None too gently, she helps Eyebags stand, supporting him by the

elbows as he sways, then toppling him over onto the waiting stretcher with a light shove to his shoulder. Midnight, of course, smiles all the while, unabashedly enjoying herself. When the bots wheel by on their way out of the arena, Katsuki turns to follow them, snarl already building up behind his teeth as all the things he wants to say fight for dominance in his throat. Midnight's nails scrape against the back of his neck as she nabs him by the collar.

"Not you, Bakugou. Are you injured?"

"Of fucking course not!" Katsuki snaps, squirming until she releases his jacket. "He didn't even touch me!"

"Then you don't need to see Recovery Girl! Unless you're worried about your classmate?"

"Hell no!"

"Then there's no reason for you to go after them! Follow me, I'll take you to the waiting room for the awards ceremony. Congratulations on second place!"

"Don't fucking congratulate me on that bullshit match!" Katsuki yells as he follows her down a tunnel. "Second fucking place – I was supposed to win!"

"Oh? I don't think anyone told Shinsou that."

"That fucker hasn't seen anything yet! He shouldn't have even made it that far, just wait until–" Midnight's eyes glint, sharp and devious, and Katsuki grinds his teeth down around the rest of the words that want to spill from his mouth. "Fuck off," he bites out instead.

"Language," Midnight teases with a wink. She pinches the air next to his cheek, not actually touching him, but Katsuki snaps his teeth at her fingers, regardless. Apparently delighted, she laughs, "Sorry Bakugou, you're just too cute when you're worked up. I couldn't resist!"

Fucking *cute?* Katsuki shrinks back towards his shoulders with a grimace. He's not fucking *cute* and Midnight is the fucking *worst.* She shows him into a waiting room and then, blessedly leaves him in peace. Fucking Midnight, with her dumb BDSM gimmick and incessant fucking teasing and total disrespect to basic decency and boundaries. Fucking *Zombie Eyes*, fucking gen ed, can't-throw-a-punch ass, saying shit like that and then *fainting* like a pussy instead of

fucking *fighting*.

Why don't you finish the fucking job?

I'd be doing the world a favor.

In through the nose – one, two, three, four; hold for seven; out through the mouth – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Fucking breathe. Just fucking breathe. Everything is worse when you *don't fucking breathe*, Katsuki.

Or would you rather I do it myself?

I've thought about it.

Katsuki feels sick. He needs to breathe. Why can't he breathe?

"Bakugou? Are you alright?"

Katsuki doesn't fucking jump. A new scorch mark appears on the table beneath his palm, and he digs his fingers into the blackened layer of wood until little crumbs of it catch under his nails. The octopus stands just inside the doorway, staring at Katsuki, a look too close to concern.

"I'm fucking fine," Katsuki says.

And he is. Of course he is. He always is. And even if he wasn't, he would be now, because he's hardly going to be anything other than *fine* in front of this no-name extra. Katsuki is fine. Katsuki is breathing. Somewhere, Izuku is still breathing.

Octopus stares at Katsuki for another moment, but silently takes a seat. After a heavy second, he pointedly looks to the wall, relieving Katsuki of the burden of his attention, as if he is doing Katsuki a favor by giving him the illusion of goddamned privacy. Katsuki sneers, swallows painfully. He breathes.

In through the nose – one, two, three, four; hold for seven; out through the mouth – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. In through the nose – everything's fine; hold – absolutely fucking fine; out through the mouth – fine, goddamned fine, just fucking breathe.

Fifteen cyclical breaths later, Midnight opens the door, gesturing the people with her inside. Deku walks in first, unflinchingly meeting Katsuki's eyes. Behind him, Eyebags slinks into the room, slouching with his shoulders hunched up like he somehow thinks he can go

unseen when he's one of only four people in a room and nearly six fucking feet tall. Katsuki's eyes dart from one boy to the other, ignoring Midnight entirely as she tells them that she'll be back shortly before she leaves with a wink. Deku pulls out a chair down the table from Katsuki. Eyebags hovers awkwardly for a moment, then leans against the wall, failing to pass for casual.

"I'm Izuku," Deku says, greeting Octopus with a flat smile. It's a mockery of the nerd's old sunny cheer, practically grotesque, but Octopus nods obliviously in return.

"Shoji Mezo. Nice to meet you."

"You, too. Actually, I had some questions about your quirk, if you wouldn't mind. You don't have to answer, that's fine, but I'm a bit of – well, an analyst, I guess you could say, and I was wondering–"

"Deku."

Izuku pauses, blinks. "Yes Katsuki?"

There are a million things Katsuki wants to say. They crowd like flames on his tongue, destructive and hot, but then, with a thought – a memory that won't stay where it fucking belongs – they're doused. *I've thought about it*, choked through tears. Great, heaving sobs splattering dark marks onto the concrete floor of the tunnel and staining the navy knees of Deku's uniform a mourning black. All the things burning in Katsuki sputter and die.

"What the fuck was that?" he asks, all that's left. Katsuki hates the cold, but he feels it from the inside now. Cold and full of smoke, thick enough to choke him.

"I know you wanted a match," Deku says, sounding only vaguely apologetic, "but Shinsou got the best of me. You can't be mad – he got the best of you, too."

Can't be mad? *Can't be mad?* Katsuki can be whatever he damn well pleases, and fuck anyone who tries to stop him, Deku most of all. Fuck the shivery feeling in his own chest, fuck intrusive thoughts of tears and confessions. Katsuki will show Deku fucking *mad*.

"*Shinsou*," Katsuki spits, tossing his chair back as he stands, "didn't get the best of fucking *anyone*. He won with a cheap fucking trick, and the only reason he got as far as he did is because Sparkle Fucker and that 1-B asshole he was matched up against are just as useless as he is. You

hear that?" Katsuki asks, whirling around to face Eyebags, who stands tense against the wall, spiteful darkness visible on his face, poorly hidden beneath a thin veneer of indifference. "We both know which of us would win in a fair fight."

"I already did."

"You used a *dirty fucking trick* is what you did. That same shit wouldn't work twice."

Eyebags shrugs, glancing off to the side. "That's the thing, Bakugou. I only needed it to work once."

"You–"

Everything goes indistinct for a moment. Katsuki can't even say how long, only that he is sitting at the end of it. Eyebags presses the back of his hand beneath his nose, meeting Katsuki's glare with bored eyes that make no attempt to disguise the challenge sparkling in their depths. Hands shaking, Katsuki moves to stand again, only to be stopped by a tight grip on his shoulder, pressing him down.

"Don't fucking touch me," he snaps, shaking Deku's hands off him. An explosion crackles between his fingers, reverberating through his wrists and sending echoes through his bones.

"Leave Shinsou alone," Deku says. "You'll only get yourself in trouble if you try to fight him now."

"Did–" Katsuki swallows uncomfortably, staring at the clouded glass of Deku's eyes. "Did you fucking *tell him* to say that to me?" Deku's brows furrow, a convincing display of confusion that Katsuki couldn't care less about. Deku is a well-practiced liar, but Katsuki has never fallen for it, and he won't start now. "You fucking *did,* didn't you?!" he accuses. "That's how he knew. You were too chickenshit to fight me for yourself, so you formed a little villain alliance and sent your brainwasher after me."

"Shinsou's not a villain."

"You sound insane," the brainwasher says, trepidation leaking into his voice. Katsuki turns to him.

"Do I? You're just pissed I figured you out. Not as smart as you think you are, huh?"

“Look, he didn’t tell me anything, alright. We didn’t have any kind of – alliance, or whatever it is you think is going on. I beat him, and then I beat you. There’s not any kind of conspiracy here.”

“You beat him?” Katsuki laughs cruelly. “Yeah right. I knew it didn’t make any sense. Deku should have fucking *destroyed* you.”

“My quirk got him, same as it got you.”

“Do you really believe that? You got him because he *let you*. No way a freak like Deku would let you activate a quirk like that on accident. He knows fucking everything about quirks, it’s *what he does*.”

“Katsuki, stop.”

There is something in Katsuki’s lungs, cramped and painful, stabbing into him with every inhale. He takes all those sharp edges and turns them outward, where they can’t hurt him anymore.

“Because I’m right? Maybe I wasn’t before, but I am now. You come back all *different* after running around with villains for the past five years, and I’m supposed to believe you got your ass handed to you by a gen ed student because you made an idiot mistake? Why’d you do it? Were you that afraid to face me? Still a fucking coward, even after all this time, huh? Killing daddy didn’t do much to help you grow a fucking spine, did it?”

“What the hell, asshole?!” Eyebags shouts.

Katsuki’s own words catch up to him like a tidal wave, pulling him under the current before he has a chance to gasp for air. Breathe, he needs to breathe. Izuku’s eyes, locked with Katsuki’s own, are dark and distant.

I’vethoughtaboutitI’vethoughtaboutitI’vethoughtaboutit

What’s he thinking now? Katsuki doesn’t want to know.

“This isn’t about you, Katsuki.”

I wasn’t even thinking of you, then.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. The living are meant to leave behind the dead. Five years ago, Katsuki decided that Izuku was dead to him. And that was meant to be it. But Katsuki has spent the last five years haunted, while his ghost hardly even thinks of him. Katsuki who

has been left behind. Katsuki who is clinging on. Unheard and unthought of. Insubstantial. Inconsequential.

Maybe Katsuki is the ghost, here.

“Katsuki, you have to *breathe.*”

“I don’t need your shitty help,” Katsuki says. His voice sounds too weak to his own ears.

“Maybe not mine,” Izuku agrees.

“I *don’t need–”*

“Bakugou!”

“What do you fucking *want,* Eyebags?!”

And for an indefinite moment, Katsuki doesn’t need to worry about things like breathing, or being fine, or needing help. He doesn’t need to worry about things like *I’ve thought about it*, or *I wasn’t even thinking of you*.

A touch to his shoulder brings him back. He feels tired and shaky as he blinks into the bright blue of Midnight’s eyes. She is not smiling. Katsuki tears his eyes from hers, forcing a scowl to his face as he looks towards Eyebags, who is sitting on the floor now, instead of standing against the wall, face wan. He has pulled the collar of his t-shirt up to press it over the lower part of his face, a red stain creeping through the white fabric. Serves him fucking right.

“Bakugou?” Midnight asks. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fucking fine.”

She looks doubtful. “It’s time for the awards ceremony. Can you handle that?”

“Of fucking course I fucking can. Do I look like a damn invalid to you? I can stand on a shitty block of concrete to get a useless hunk of metal.”

Katsuki pushes Midnight away, stubbornly disallowing the trembling of his knees as he stands. He is the first out the door, leaving all the extras behind him. As he walks, he breathes. In for four, hold for seven, out for eight. Ignore the way it burns. Four, seven, eight. Ignore the crumpled-paper feeling of his chest.

Four. Seven. Eight.

Tomura is a decisive person. He knows what he believes, knows what he wants, knows exactly what he is willing to do to get it. He is single-minded; Sensei taught him how to be. Indecision is a characteristic of men so weak they can't even take control of themselves. Tomura will have enough enemies in the world – people who try to change it always do – that he can't afford to add himself to that count.

He is decisive, single-minded.

Tomura knows what he wants.

At the beginning of the cavalry battle, Tomura decays the television. Because he is angry. And he tries to go to UA, on his own if Kurogiri refuses to take him, and he gets angrier still when Kurogiri not only refuses to make a gate but actively prevents him from leaving, opening a portal beneath Tomura's feet whenever he tries to approach the door.

"What do you plan to do when – if – you get to him?" Kurogiri asks, as if he is being reasonable.

"Kill him."

"And how are you planning to do that?"

"I am going to close my hands around his skull," Tomura says, enunciating slowly, spitting the edges of the words, feeling infuriatingly like he is being made to repeat himself.

"How?" Kurogiri asks again. "*Think* of what you are trying to accomplish, Shigaraki Tomura."

And Tomura does. He knows what he wants, and he imagines it with the single-minded vividness of someone who is practiced at making their wishes into reality, someone who turns *wanting* into *getting*.

Tomura's hands will sink into Izuku's the traitor's hair to reach the scalp beneath, fingers tangling in wild curls, dark green fading to matte black as strands crumble to brittle dust. Soft tissue decays faster than bone. The traitor's skull will be slippery and solid when Tomura's

fingers meet it. The thin area behind the temples will cave first, and from there the wet slime feeling of flesh and blood will transition into something gritty. Everything will mix to a grey-red paste on Tomura's palms; it will linger in the creases of his skin and beneath his nails for days. Wide, green eyes, lined with tears and shadows will twitch and spasm and roll. A heavy, wet thump when the body falls to the ground, like a puppet with its strings cut.

Everyone looks the same when they're reduced to ash.

The image is less like a dream, and more like a premonition, a creeping inevitability, a distance but visible goal. Tomura knows what he wants. Which means Tomura *will get* what he wants.

He swallows the acid in his throat.

Tomura decides he has to see the rest of the festival. Because he is angry. Because the traitor is there, and Tomura has no idea what's happening to him what he's doing. So, Tomura decides – single-minded, decisive, exactly as he should be – that it's time they return to the bar. Weeks of surveillance have shown no sign that the bar is compromised, no reason for them to stay away.

"We need a proper base of operations," Tomura says, "not this shitty rundown apartment. We can't get anything done here."

This time, Kurogiri agrees.

Tomura gets what he wants.

He is angry anyway, and he is angry still when they get home to the bar. He doesn't bother imagining, here. All that comes to mind is Sensei, sitting on a stool with a glass in hand, nodding his acknowledgement to Tomura. Izuku, curled up in a booth, notebooks spread around him as the news plays on the television. And there is no point in imagining things that can't come true, that can't be made true, even with single-minded devotion. No point in lingering on the dead or the might-as-well-be-dead.

Tomura doesn't let himself want things he can't get.

And Tomura is – he's angry. He burns with it. His chest, his eyes, the back of his throat.

The first round of the one-on-one matches is half over. The traitor has already won his first match, and Tomura missed it, and he is *angry*.

What remains, Tomura watches, rapt and enraged. Watches so intently his eyes water.

And it is like watching through two sets of eyes. There is nothing single-minded about it. Everything that used to be addition becomes division and nothing is adding up anymore.

Fire spirals around the traitor as he stares down his opponent. Izuku stops to grin at Tomura in the middle of training. The traitor walks out of bounds. Izuku hits Tomura's shoulder in his excitement as they watch the festival together. Smiling, the traitor ducks his head so All Might can slip his medal over his head. Late at night, Izuku whispers to Tomura about how the world is far too broken for one man to fix it.

And Tomura –

Tomura is a decisive person. He has to be.

He knows what he wants. He gets what he wants.

Tomura can't get what he doesn't know how to want.

Chapter End Notes

Aizawa: How many seats are open in my class?
Izuku: Two.
Aizawa: Which means?
Izuku: Idk, the class seems roomier?
Aizawa: I -- *no*

Katsuki: FIGHT ME
Hitoshi: You know what? Just for you – no

Hitoshi: My kink is people underestimating me and ending up wrong and embarrassed

Katsuki: *frothing at the mouth*
Hitoshi: Shut the fuck up
Izuku: Calm the fuck down
Shoji: Please let me the fuck out of this room

Next chapter: Explosion – Part III
Update: May 13

Explosion - Part III

Chapter Notes

> You know what's nuts? When I want to reference something from a previous chapter, so I search it up in my handy dandy single-massive-word-document, only to realize that – oh,,, oh, that happened 200 pages ago.
> (This message has been brought to you by Midnight's penis-shaped confetti)
>
> Now, Discord memes, in honor of Shoji, who didn't ask for any of this bullshit
> Cloud: X X X X X X X
> Dev: X X X X X
> Fola: X
> Ike: X
> Kai: X
> Mantis: X
> Rhino: X
> Snowy: X X X
> Surya: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta would much rather do this in the privacy of their apartment, but Nemuri still has festival related business to attend to. She's already doing him a favor by sparing time she doesn't actually have to oversee them here, standing against the wall in case they need her, sympathy and concern clear on her face. Shouta had weighed the options between going home and risking a catastrophic meltdown and dealing with the backlash in this too-public place. Ultimately, he had decided that it's better to have Nemuri on hand. If the worst were to happen in the apartment, having to physically restrain Izuku would be a terrible experience for everyone. The door to the waiting room is locked, which will have to do.

Izuku sits in the middle of the floor. Last time, he tripped over himself and fell to the ground, and Shouta would prefer to cut straight to the chase and avoid any unnecessary bumps or bruises. Hizashi sits next to the kid, already leaning close, ready to catch or cradle. Shouta crouches in front of them, eyes locked on the gleaming silver bands Izuku has cupped in one palm.

After everything, suppressing Izuku's quirk again sits wrong with Shouta. Granted, it never sat *right* with him, but to impose this punishment on the kid at the end of an exhausting day of nearly perfect behavior seems particularly vile. But the terms of the rehabilitation program are clear, and as much as Shouta may disagree with some of them, breaking the rules would only make things worse in the long run. The Commission would be on top of any infractions like sharks sensing blood in the water. So, for the foreseeable future, Izuku's quirk must be suppressed outside of training.

The bands will handle the kid's base quirk and deactivate the emotional repression quirk at the same time – two birds with one stone. No need to deactivate the dissociation quirk separately and gamble on being able to get the cuffs on with the kid potentially hysterical. This is efficient, logical. Even if it feels callous.

"It won't be as bad as last time," Izuku assures everyone. He is the only calm one in the room, tension ratcheting up between the adults. If anything, Izuku's composure only puts them more on edge. The kid seems peaceful now, but they all know it's only momentary, the calm before the storm.

"We just don't want to see you upset, Sprout," Hizashi says, forcing a smile.

"I'll probably just cry a bit and then fall asleep. I'm very tired. Or Midnight can just put me to sleep right away. It'll be fine, you'll see."

Without further fanfare, Izuku snaps a band around one wrist and then the other, metal closing tight to his skin with a faint click. Izuku blinks. Huffs a small burst of air. Gasps. Tears well up in his eyes and spill over as he curls towards his knees, folding himself in half to press his forehead against the tiles of the floor. Zashi moves into action, rubbing soothing circles between the kid's shoulder blades while Nemuri hovers in the background, one hand ready at her wrist. Shouta meets her eyes and shakes his head slightly.

Sedation is a last resort – a necessary backup plan, but an undesirable one. Knocking Izuku out is barely preferable to the kid repressing his emotions in the first place. Allowing him to sleep through the backlash and escape the worst of what he bottled up would do no favors for his long-term ability to cope with his feelings.

"I – I'm–" Izuku's throat gurgles around something that is either a sob or a laugh. Maybe both. Hizashi shushes him.

“It’s alright,” Shouta says, voice low and even, trying to mimic the way Hizashi speaks in moments like this. “The festival is over, it’s all over. Everything turned out fine. You’re fine.”

Izuku shakes his head, hair swishing against the ground. Then, between one movement and the next, he is nodding. And it *is* different than last time, Shouta observes. He hesitates to say that it’s *better*, because Izuku is still crying, and Shouta still has no idea what he is meant to do. This time, though, there is less and there is more.

That first time was the stuff of nightmares. Shouta, nearly blind and terribly pained, witnessed – *caused* – the abrupt and complete decomposition of everything that was holding Izuku together. Grief and fear and pain, so much of them that any attempt Izuku made to tread water was only delaying the inevitable. Feelings like the deep ocean, dark and cold and high pressure, unsuitable for human life. There is still grief and fear and pain, now, but less of them. And there is *more* than them – excitement, joy, and pride. Islands in an unfriendly sea.

Izuku presses his palms flat to the ground and forces himself up, coughing around a sob that turns into a laugh when he catches his breath. He smiles, wobbly but genuine, then bites his lip on another wave of tears.

“I – I’m s-sorry,” he says.

With an incoherent noise, Zashi sweeps the kid into a hug, resting his cheek on the mess of Izuku’s curls. For a brief moment, Izuku flails, hips twisted and legs splayed clumsily, one arm pinned against Hizashi’s side, but he settles into the awkward embrace, free hand grabbing a fistful of Hizashi’s jacket. Shouta jerks his chin slightly in the direction of the door, and Nemuri follows the silent command with a teasing smile that is a touch softer than her usual one. The lock snicks quietly as she reengages it from outside.

“What are you apologizing for?” Shouta asks.

“I don’t – the q-quirk. Shinsou.”

“You shouldn’t have used that quirk, and you shouldn’t have thrown that match,” Shouta agrees, “but we’ve already discussed those things. You don’t need to apologize.”

“We’re not mad,” Hizashi assures, with that comforting note to his voice that Shouta can never quite replicate. “We were worried, not

angry.”

“Kats-suki–”

“Isn’t someone you should be worrying about right now. He’s already on his way home.”

“What about you, little listener? Ready to go home?”

Izuku blinks, the specific kind of misery that pairs with exhaustion settling heavily over his features, visibly weighing him down. He lets his head fall against Hizashi’s shoulder, eyes half-lidded and unfocused as he stares somewhere near the ground. He isn’t actively crying anymore, but his eyes are still wet, occasional tears spilling over when he blinks.

Home, Shouta thinks, sure that Izuku is echoing the sentiment in his own head. To Shouta, home is an obnoxious blonde and a collection of cats. Recently, he’s been surprised to find a welcome addition in the shape of a traumatized teenager.

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees softly. But the yearning in the dark distance of his eyes makes it clear that his thoughts are elsewhere. Shouta himself isn’t a person prone to yearning, but an answering ache pangs through his chest, nevertheless. Someday, he hopes Izuku will be able to go to a place he calls home, regardless of where that may be or who it may be with.

Izuku sways when he stands, and he only gets to take a couple of steps before Hizashi is crouching down in front of him while Shouta unlocks the door. Izuku stops, blinking blearily. Hizashi pats himself on the shoulders, looking back at the kid with a goofy grin.

“Hop on!”

Face red with realization, Izuku shakes his head, “I can w-walk.” Shouta snorts, keeping his opinion on that matter to himself as he leans against the doorway and waits. Izuku shifts from foot to foot when Hizashi doesn’t stand. The embarrassed discomfort is a relief to see after hours of blankness and exclusively performative expressions. *There’s* the mess of a kid who had been so conspicuously absent the last few hours.

“Come on,” Hizashi says, whining just slightly. “Shouta never lets me carry him around.”

“I’m a grown man.”

“See? See what I have to put up with? Do an old man a favor.” Hizashi pouts, patting his shoulders again.

“You look about ready to fall asleep on your feet,” Shouta adds in Hizashi’s favor. It’s an exaggeration, he’ll admit, but only a slight one, and it’s worth it for the grin Zashi gives him in return. Izuku hesitates, and Hizashi stops with his dramatics, smiling more gently.

“You can walk if you want,” he says, “but you’ve had a long day, and that much quirk use would take it out of anyone. If you’re tired, I can carry you, no problem.”

“Alright,” Izuku permits after a moment.

He climbs onto Hizashi’s back, made stiff by his uncertainty, but gets situated with a bit of subtle help along the way. Hizashi doesn’t grunt as he straightens up – which Shouta suspects is for Izuku’s benefit, lest the kid think he’s too heavy or something equally absurd. Izuku buries his face in the crook of his elbow, his arms wrapped in a loose hold around Hizashi’s neck. The tips of his ears are flushed a vibrant red where they stick out of his hair. Hizashi grins, pleased and overly proud of himself, and Shouta rolls his eyes externally. Internally, he can’t help but find the whole sight endearing.

At this point, the hallways are mostly empty, and Shouta, an expert at avoiding people, leads them down unoccupied paths. The few members of staff they pass on their way out of the stadium never spare them more than a glance before a harsh glare from Shouta quickly dissuades them from further curiosity. The walk to and from the staff apartments normally takes Shouta and Hizashi around fifteen minutes, give or take a few to account for variables like weather, how quickly they feel like walking, and whether or not one of them is carrying a whole fifteen-year-old’s worth of extra weight. By the time Shouta wrestles open the front door of the building, Izuku’s arms have gone limp and Hizashi has to lean forward to ensure the kid doesn’t go toppling to the ground.

Shouta escorts the way up to their second-floor apartment, shushing Bastard harshly when she yowls about their return. She ignores him completely, of course, like the absolute ingrate she is, making far more noise than a cat her size should be capable of as she runs into her closet, but Izuku doesn’t even twitch. Rather gracelessly, Hizashi dumps the kid into his bed, rearranging limbs on top of the covers into

a passably comfortable looking position.

Kid taken care of for the next few hours, if not the night, Shouta returns to the living room. Disco stands expectantly near the kitchen, meowing loudly as Shouta walks past him without delivering any food. Nearly a decade they have had Disco, and the little idiot still hasn't realized that they get fed on a schedule. Lucy is curled up in a corner of the couch, face tucked into the fluff of his tail.

"Goddamn it, Nemuri," Shouta sighs, spotting several specks of blue caught up in Lucy's coat. More than a week since Izuku moved in and that confetti is still popping up everywhere in the apartment. Poor Lucy gets the worse of it, long fur attracting the small bits like a magnet. The white bits blend in completely until someone pets him and ends up combing out tiny paper penises.

Hizashi emerges from their bedroom, having removed his hearing aids. He looks between Shouta's long-suffering expression and Lucy, sleeping obliviously, and snickers unrepentantly.

"Little dick cat," Hizashi coos, leaning over the back of the couch.

"Don't call him that," Shouta scolds, even though Hizashi can't hear him and doesn't even bother to look up so Shouta can sign his retort.

Hizashi reaches down to brush the confetti out of Lucy's fur, but the moment he makes contact, Lucy startles violently, jerking awake. He cranes his head around to blink at Hizashi, glances around the room, and then jumps away, slinking down the hallway towards Izuku's room. Shouta laughs at the exaggerated look of offense on Hizashi's face, claiming the now-empty couch, wishing he could fall into the same deep unconsciousness that has claimed Izuku. Hizashi brushes a hand through Shouta's hair before taking a seat in the armchair and making himself comfortable with a book.

With the sports festival behind them, they have the next three days off, but in Shouta's experience, sports festival weekends are rarely restful, despite their length. There will be footage to review, reports to draw up, lessons to plan, internship requests to process. This year, especially, will be worse than usual. Shouta wishes poignantly that he could huddle up in bed and let someone else handle everything, but he has a job to do. And who is he kidding – he's never been any good at delegating, anyway.

Tomorrow – finally getting these damned casts off. Therapy for Izuku. Wrangle the rat into a meeting. Then house calls. Shinsou first,

assuming Nedzu agrees, which Shouta will make sure he does. Shinsou will be easier. Explain the situation to the guardian's, get papers signed, leave. Much less simple – Tokoyami. Explain the situation to the family when Shouta doesn't even understand the situation, excellent. They'll have questions he won't be able to answer, and chances are high someone is going to get emotional and then Shouta will be expected to deal with that. Shouta *hates* house calls.

Saturday – the worst house call, possibly ever. Meet with the Bakugou's. Navigate the horrible minefield of confidentiality. Let Hizashi deal with the emotions. Figure out how to interact with a parent as – another parent? A guardian? – something other than a teacher.

Sunday – grading, lots of it. Thankfully, he only has papers from his third year Law & Ethics class, so he has it easier than Hizashi, with all his English essays. Hope nothing from Friday or Saturday bleeds over so he might have at least a little free time. Maybe finally get some rest, but don't count on it.

It's exhausting just to think about. Izuku's appointment is at ten tomorrow morning. That gives Shouta about 18 hours before the world starts making demands of him again. Determined to make the most of them, he closes his eyes and sinks further into the couch.

Dear Izuku, - what am I just supposed to refer to myself in third person?

Dear Me, - there is nothing dear about me.

I don't know how to address a letter to myself. Dr. Ashikawa told me to write a letter as if I was "someone else, deserving of kindness and compassion." She also wants me to write to other people – letters that say everything I think and feel, that will never be sent. It's supposed to be a good way to confront and organize your emotions, which is something I need to learn to do. Those letters sound easier to write than this one. I don't think I'm even doing it right. Usually letters have a "you," don't they? But I'm only using "I."

You don't think you understand this exercise. Maybe you'll try again later.

The door is a simple, dark blue, with chipping paint along the edges. Izuku wants to stare at it. He thinks he could let the gravity of this situation freeze him in place for hours, days, weeks, and he still wouldn't feel prepared. Right down the street, he can see the apartment building where he lived with his mother. If he looked, he could probably spot the windows of their old unit. He doesn't look. His heart beats in his throat; his stomach is there with it. He never should have agreed to this. He doesn't belong here anymore.

Eraser, either oblivious to Izuku's inner turmoil or all too aware of it, reaches over Izuku's head, jamming his thumb into the doorbell without hesitation.

A muffled yell from within splits the silence on the doorstep, "Masaru! They're here! Get the door!"

Eraser pulls Izuku back a step as the door swings open. Uncle Masaru smiles a touch nervously, glancing between Eraser and Mic, before looking down to Izuku, who stands between them. There are new lines scattered around his face and his look of mixed fondness and regret is not one Izuku has seen before, but his eyes are just as kind as Izuku remembers.

"Hey Izukun," the man says, "why are you crying?"

Ducking his head, Izuku scrubs at his eyes. He hadn't even realized that he had started to tear up, much less cry, and he wipes the tears away with frustrated swipes of his wrists. He isn't a baby, and the Bakugous shouldn't have to with his tear duct's hair trigger. Five years since he has seen them, and he still hasn't grown out of this childish habit. Mic squeezes his shoulder.

"Ah, come on kiddo," Uncle Masaru says, a gently chiding tone that takes Izuku straight back to his childhood, "you can't cry. If you cry, then *I'm* gonna cry, and no one wants that." It is a familiar threat, one Uncle Masaru made nearly every time they interacted when Izuku was small. He even followed through on a couple of occasions, stunning a toddler-aged Izuku out of whatever fit he had gotten stuck in, then coaxing him into laughter with ridiculous jokes.

"No, we certainly don't," Aunt Mitsuki agrees. She appears from

behind Uncle, not even sparing a look to the heroes standing to either side before focusing in on Izuku. He hardly gets a moment to look at her before she has him wrapped up in her arms.

Love you, kiddo.

I love you, too.

She had hugged him, then, long and tight. Aunt Mitsuki doesn't hug like most other people do. There's no fitting together with her, no slotting limbs into corresponding places. She brute forces her way through hugs just like she does the rest of life, wrapping herself around a person and squeezing until they give in. Izuku does so willingly.

Aunt Mitsuki looks the same, sounds the same, smells the same, hugs the same – and for a moment, Izuku feels like he is ten years old again, clinging to her, knowing that he'll lose her as soon as he lets go. He wraps his arms around her back, presses his face into her shoulder, and pretends that he never left her embrace.

But Izuku hadn't been crying, then. His mother had just been taken from him, one of the few times in his life where he went so numb that tears were beyond him. And he had been smaller. Aunt Mitsuki had needed to crouch down to hug him properly. Now, he is nearly as tall as she is, only a couple of inches shorter, at most.

She pulls back. But she doesn't walk away, and Kurogiri isn't here to lead Izuku into a new life. It has been five years. Five long years. She stares into Izuku's face for a long moment. The rims of her eyes are tinted red, but she smiles at him, the soft one that makes her look nothing like Katsuki.

"It's been too long," she finally says, slightly gruff. "Next time you go five years without calling I won't let you off so easy." For the first time, her eyes drift to Eraser and Mic, standing silently in the background. "Sorry about that, didn't mean to be rude. You must be, uh–" she cuts off, squinting.

"Aizawa Shouta and Yamada Hizashi," Uncle Masaru fills in. "Aizawa is Katsuki's homeroom teacher, as well."

"Right. Well, come on in, we can talk in the living room." Aunt Mitsuki holds Izuku by the shoulder, guiding him or maybe unwilling to let go. The house seems surreal. Izuku recalls long days of playing in these rooms, but none of the decorations are the same and all the

furniture has been shifted around.

“Where is the littlest Bakugou?” Mic asks, glancing around the house.

“The brat’s in his room. He’s been in a mood lately, refused to so much as make an appearance. Eventually he’ll get hungry, and that’ll drive him out. Take a seat anywhere you’d like.”

Izuku takes a spot at the end of the couch, with Mic next to him and Eraser half-standing half-leaning on the arm of the couch. He glances down the hall as he does, towards Katsuki’s room, stomach squirming. There was a grimness to Aunt Mitsuki’s words, as much as she tried to force casualness.

Aunt Mitsuki sits across from them, sighing. “I have a lot of questions.”

“Ask away! We’ll tell you as much as we can,” Mic says, a friendly grin masking the implication that they won’t tell her *everything*. She catches it anyway, eyes narrowing. Uncle Masaru frowns beside her.

“When did you come back to Japan?” she asks Izuku. Then, with pointed looks at Mic and Eraser, “Where’s your father? Did something happen? If you need somewhere to stay, you always have a place with us.”

“Most of the details are confidential,” Eraser says.

“Confidential?” Aunt Mitsuki interjects, baffled and indignant.

“Yes. Akatani Hisashi was the alias of a villain, who is no longer in the picture. Izuku was brought to hero attention during the USJ attack, and he is now a ward of UA.”

It is, perhaps, the most reductive telling of Izuku’s story possible, completely withholding any mention of Izuku’s own misdeeds and dubious legal status. Aunt Mitsuki leans back, blinking rapidly, as if those two, bare sentences have hit her like a blow. Mic reaches across Izuku to smack Eraser in the knee, gaining nothing but an unimpressed look in response. Izuku hangs his head and waits out the silence, shame churning in his stomach like curdled milk.

Eventually, she whispers, “I let him take you.”

“Mitsuki–”

“No, Masaru! He was in our *house*, and I – I never liked Hisashi. I liked him even less after he left. He came and went with Izuku within a day, and I *let it happen*! They didn’t even stay for the funeral! And then not a word! No calls, no emails, no nothing, and I just – I thought it was the way of the world. I thought ‘oh, I guess that’s it, then,’ and it was, but only because I *let it be*! I was the adult! I should have looked into things, *looked after you*–”

“Please stop,” Izuku blurts, shell-shocked and distressed. Once again, he is crying, neck wet and sticky from the tears that have dripped to his collar bones.

“I – I’m so sorry,” Aunt Mitsuki says, and she sounds it. Sorry for what, though? Sorry for *Izuku*?

Rather than linger on that thought, Izuku asks, “She had a funeral?”

“Yes. Of course. It was beautiful. Small, but beautiful. Your mother was well-loved, Izu. I still leave flowers by her grave whenever I can.”

“*Grave?*”

“…Yes. In the cemetery near–”

“Can we go there?” Izuku interrupts without thinking. He looks to Eraser because it’s him – rational and unafraid to reject Izuku as he is – who will have the final say. “Now? Can we go *now?*”

Logically, it makes sense that Izuku’s mother has a grave, somewhere. Izuku knew that she was dead, and it follows that something must have been done with her body – either turned to ash or sunk beneath the earth.

But at the same time, Izuku’s mother didn’t really *die*. She *disappeared.* One morning she sent him off to school and then that afternoon the police came to tell him she was gone. And the next day All for One came, and Izuku’s entire life started over, seemingly from scratch. Midoriya Izuku died that day as surely as his mother had, and Shigaraki Izuku was left behind, a boy who might as well have never had a mother at all.

That Midoriya Inko is still *real,* still *exists* in a way outside of Izuku’s memories and the locket that weighs like lead against his chest has never occurred to him. And now that he knows about it, Izuku wants – *needs,* with a ravenous desperation – to make that connection.

Eraser looks at him with a doubtful frown, and for a moment Izuku is sure the man will say no. That the demand is too short notice, and the visit will need to wait for another time.

Instead, Eraser sighs. “How far is this place?”

“Not far,” Aunt Mitsuki answers, speaking quieter than Izuku is used to hearing her. Her voice is nearly lost beneath the pounding of his heart in his ears.

“Alright then–” Eraser grunts as Izuku collides with him, quickly adjusting his balance when he nearly falls from his perch on the arm of the couch. Izuku buries his face in the hero’s side. Hands, newly freed from casts, pat Izuku on the shoulders and the obvious discomfort in the gesture makes Izuku pull back, face hot.

“Yeah, alright, I get it kid,” Eraser says, stilted. “You’re welcome. I still have some business to discuss regarding your son,” he tells Aunt Mitsuki. “It would be best if he was here for it. Do you want to do that before or after?”

“I think it would be best for everyone if Izuku wasn’t here for that,” she says, frowning towards Katsuki’s bedroom door. Eraser hums, noncommittal agreement. “Your friend and I can take Izuku, then you can lure Kat out of his room for whatever it is. Masaru can fill me in later.”

Mic and Eraser exchange a look, probably trying to figure out how to tell her that Izuku needs constant supervision without revealing more information about the situation.

“Sounds good,” Eraser says. “Keep me updated, Hizashi.”

To Izuku’s surprise, that seems to be enough, though he doesn’t quite believe it until Mic is starting the car.

Dear Dad,

Sometimes I wonder if you ever loved me. I want to think you did, but more and more every day, there’s a part of myself that asks how you could love me and do what you did. How can you love someone and

treat them like they don't matter? Or like they do matter, but not in the right ways. Like what they can do matters, but not what they feel or want.

But maybe that's hypocritical. Because I definitely loved you. I still do. Love you, that is. But I did what I did, anyway. I'm sure it felt bad. I'm sure you didn't want it. What you felt, what you wanted – well, that did matter to me. It just didn't matter enough. Other things just mattered more. It had nothing to do with loving you.

Maybe you thought the same thing when you did the things you did.

Maybe we loved each other. But neither of us loved the other enough.

I'm sorry for not loving you enough. I'm sorry for not being enough for you to love.

Katsuki pulls his headphones over his ears and turns his music up, so he won't hear when Deku arrives. Then he turns it back down because he can't stand not knowing. Back and forth it goes – the desire for oblivion, the need for vigilance, Katsuki caught between them and feeling sick no matter what he does.

Soon, Deku will be inside his house. Maybe he already is. Maybe Katsuki missed it while his music was loud. He pulls his headphones down around his neck, listening hard for anything other than his pulse. No talking. Not yet, then. More waiting, like he's trapped in some kind of fucking purgatory.

He could leave the house. Leave and come back near sunset. Surely by then the invasion would be over, and Katsuki could pretend it didn't even happen. Except the old hag would never allow that. Katsuki already had to throw a category five fuss to get her to lay off him about coming out and *talking*, like he and Deku were still a couple of buddy-buddy toddlers.

When the front door closes, it rattles Katsuki's bedframe, just slightly. It shakes the very core of him, an earthquake traveling down the fault lines of Katsuki's entire fucking world view.

The last time Deku was in this house, he caught Katsuki's eyes and

said, “I think you were right about me, Kacchan.” And god, at the time it had sounded like a death sentence. Death had followed Katsuki home. Everything he thought he knew, everything that he had been building his life around since he was four years old, was validated, was proven correct with that single sentence. A confession. *You were right about me*.

Except Katsuki doesn’t think he was.

More often than he would like, Katsuki remembers the hollow, hopeless feeling of calling for a quirk that doesn’t answer. Remembers the absence of everything that he was, how it was stolen away when he wasn’t even looking. Now, he remembers listless eyes and a little boy crying, “I don’t know what’s going on.” That recollection has the same hollow, hopeless feeling as the first.

Ten years too late, Katsuki realizes that he wasn’t the only one who lost something that day. But he might be the only one who actually got it back.

And it – it’s *repulsive*. Katsuki never knows how to admit when he’s wrong, and he thinks this is the most wrong he has ever been in his life, has been for most *of* his life at this point. He’s *wrong* and doesn’t know how to be right. He doesn’t even know what right *is,* apart from not-him.

All he knows is he doesn’t want Izuku anywhere near him. He wants them to lead perfectly parallel lives, a fixed distance, never intersecting. Safe, for both of them.

Because Katsuki thinks *wrong* around Deku.

“I’m not coming out!” Katsuki shouts at his door when his mother knocks. She should know by this point to leave well enough alone.

An unexpected voice answers him. “Bakugou. Come out, we need to have a conversation.”

“Fuck you!”

“Izuku’s gone.”

It’s ridiculous, how the edges of the world become clearer with those two words. It’s fucking stupid, it doesn’t make any sense, but Hobo-Sensei says “Izuku’s gone,” and all that *wrong thought* crowding Katsuki’s mind fades into the background. He still has no desire to

have a “conversation” with his teacher, but he no longer feels like a fucking fort under siege. He has no idea why he even felt that way to begin with.

Grudgingly, Katsuki stands and opens his door. Hobo-Sensei meets his glare with a bored expression. He is already tired of Katsuki’s behavior and conveys that perfectly well without hardly moving a muscle. Katsuki forgot how fucking good the asshole was at disapproving expressions when he was all mummified, but now that he’s been unwrapped, he looks just as bitchy as ever, the new scar under his right eye only adding to the effect.

Katsuki huffs as Hobo-Sensei leads the way to the living room without further word, as if Katsuki needs to be lead around his own home. Pops is waiting there, and Hobo-Sensei gestures for Katsuki to sit, taking his own seat across from them.

“What did you need, Aizawa?” Pops asks, too friendly.

“Starting Monday, Izuku will officially be a member of class 1-A,” Hobo-Sensei announces.

Katsuki’s ears ring, muffling whatever congratulatory bullshit his father is saying. Deku will be in 1-A. Just a seat or two behind Katsuki unless they rearrange the entire classroom. Katsuki *knew* about this. Hobo-Sensei had told the entire class that a villain from the USJ may be transferring in as part of a rehabilitation program, and Katsuki knew that that villain was Deku. Of course they would go through with transferring the nerd when he got third place. Of course they would. Katsuki *already knew about this*.

But that doesn’t stop him from saying, “You can’t fucking do that!”

“Katsuki,” his father scolds. The reprimand is weak compared to the old hag’s.

“You can’t let him into the hero course, that’s *my* class! He doesn’t fucking belong there! He’s a fucking villain–”

Katsuki is thinking *wrong* again. It creeps up on him. He spent so long thinking it was right that he can’t recognize it anymore. Hobo-Sensei stares at him, unimpressed, letting the silence sit for a moment in case Katsuki decides to go off again, and Katsuki bites his tongue to stop the flow of sludge coming out of his mouth.

“I’m aware that the two of you have history,” Hobo-Sensei finally

says. “That’s why I wanted to give you another option. If you can’t handle being classmates, then Nedzu has agreed that you could be swapped into class B–”

“Ex-fucking-cuse me?!”

“You could be swapped into class B,” Hobo-Sensei repeats blandly.

“Why not put fucking Deku into class B?!”

“Izuku has to be in my class. That’s an explicit requirement of the program he’s in.”

“I don’t understand,” Pops says. “Why can’t they be in the same class?”

“It’s important for classmates in the hero course to have some degree of trust in each other,” Hobo-Sensei explains, ignoring Katsuki’s snarling. “They don’t all need to be friends, they don’t even need to get along – but if, say, one student legitimately feared or hated another, that could greatly increase the risk involved in many of the exercises we do. Hero training is already a highly dangerous thing, but we do our best as heroes and educators to minimize the potential of harm to our students.”

“And you think Katsuki and Izuku have a relationship like that? Katsuki wouldn’t – he’s a good kid.” Pops has a little frown on his face, the kind that is fighting to be stern, but usually needs the old hag around to back it up if it actually wants to get there.

“I didn’t mean to imply he wasn’t. But the situation is complicated, and *all* students deserve a classroom setting where they can feel comfortable and safe.”

Like slipping into an ice bath, Katsuki realizes that Hobo-Sensei isn’t talking about Deku. He looks at Katsuki with dark, overly-knowing eyes that make all the *wrong* parts of Katsuki’s brain howl and screech. Katsuki’s old man is still frowning, darting little concerned looks Katsuki’s way as if he won’t notice.

“What about his friends? It just – it seems like it would be a little hard, wouldn’t it? Switching into a different class at this point when he doesn’t have to?”

Hobo-Sensei nods. “That’s something to consider. The rest of this term would proceed as normal, but the hero course roster could be shuffled

entirely at the beginning of next. Bakugou would end up with old friends as well as potential new ones in 1-B. It hasn't been done before, but considering the unusually high amount of animosity between the two hero classes this year, it wouldn't be remiss, even apart from Bakugou's involvement."

"Hell no! It's *my* fucking class, I'm not leaving because of Deku!"

Katsuki's father looks at him doubtfully. "Do you really think something like that is necessary?"

"It's an offer," Hobo-Sensei sighs. "That's all. Feel free to accept or reject it. But Bakugou – I *will not* tolerate any aggression in my classroom."

"Rejected," Katsuki snaps. He's had enough of this. Hobo-Sensei and Katsuki's father talk in hushed voices behind him as he storms back to his room, but Katsuki can't make sense of their words over the roar of the fire that is eating all the oxygen out of his lungs.

Katsuki is not a *problem* that needs to be fucking *solved*. He's a goddamned person, and if he doesn't want Deku in his fucking class, then he has his fucking reasons. Why does it never occur to anyone that maybe *Deku* is the problem? No one ever stops to consider that the shy boy with the big green eyes who cries at the drop of the hat could actually *deserve* every–

Goddamn it. *Goddamn it.* He's thinking all *wrong* again! He needs to breathe.

Izuku is going to join 1-A.

And that's *fine.* There are 17 other extras in the class, and Katsuki dislikes almost all of them. He can ignore one more. Hell, Izuku is *less* obnoxious than the Robo Nerd, so it should be easy. Just pretend he doesn't exist, Katsuki does it all the time with everyone else. It's fine.

Katsuki feels like he might be sick.

It should be so easy, but everything is *wrong*. In retrospect, exploding like this is obviously *stupid* and *unnecessary,* but in the moment, everything feels so urgent and *all-consuming*. It sticks to Katsuki's thoughts like tar, sucking him under. He can't shake it loose. He wonders if a blast would do the trick.

Jesus fucking christ. What the fuck?

Stiffly, Katsuki forces himself back out of his room. He feels like a dog with its tail between its legs and tells himself that it's not cowardly when he's walking *towards* something, instead of running away. Reminds himself to breathe – but not that fast, that's too fast.

"Hey!" he calls, standing at the mouth of the hallway, hand closed in a death grip around the corner of the wall.

"Are you alright, Kat?" Pops asks. Katsuki doesn't look at him, staring down Hobo-Sensei as he tries to figure out how to say *I have no fucking idea*.

"I'm fucking staying in 1-A!" Katsuki barks. Hobo-Sensei raises an eyebrow. "But you said if I wanted to – I don't know, fucking *talk* to someone or whatever the fuck. You said you could – set that up."

Hobo-Sensei nods. "I'll make you an appointment with Hound Dog on Monday."

"Okay, fucking – fine! Thanks, I guess. Fuck you!"

When Katsuki gets back to his room, his legs are pathetically weak, and his throat is so tight he can barely swallow. But he breathes a little easier.

Dear Katsuki Kacchan,

Kacchan, not Katsuki. Katsuki isn't really worth talking to.

Our heights are still marked on the doorframe of your parents' bedroom. There's more marks for you than me, obviously. Mine stop when we were five. Yours only go up until you were eight. I imagine you got sick of it, by then.

I remember trying to stand up on my toes to seem bigger than I was, but Aunt Mitsuki would always push me back down. You always huffed and slouched and crossed your arms and wouldn't stand up straight no matter how much she scolded you. You were still always taller.

Sometimes, I'm so jealous of you that it's disgusting. Two parents who love you just enough. Never need to worry about money. Admired by

so many people. A golden path paved directly to your dreams. I know it's not as if your life has been perfect. Everyone has their issues, and you're certainly no exception. But the worst thing that has ever happened to you is me.

Imagine that. The worst day of your life, over with when you're only four years old. I would give anything for our worst days to have been the same, but my life just kept going downhill.

Really, you should be happy that I'm the villain of your story. I'm sorry I hurt you, Kacchan. But it could have been so much worse.

Chapter End Notes

Mic, holding up Lucy: Dick cat
Aizawa: Leave him alone.
Mic: Silly little dick cat!
Aizawa: No!
Mic: Airhead. Useless baby man.
Aizawa: *NO!!!*

Mitsuki: Your friend and I –
Mic: I am his HUSBAND

Bakugou: Was anyone going to tell me that I was mentally ill, or was I just supposed to have a breakdown and figure that out for myself?

Next Chapter: Explosion – Part IV
Update: May 20

Explosion - Part IV

Chapter Notes

> For clarification, Izuku has been in therapy since he became a ward of UA. This has been mentioned glancingly a couple of times, and generally speaking his therapy (and Katsuki's) are very much background events. Therapy is important for them both, but I'm unlikely to get into much, if any, detail about what happens in their sessions because I don't know shit about shit and that's not something I'm comfortable talking out of my ass about (research? I don't know her).
>
> Also, I usually try to confine my experimental narrative bullshit to a single part, but there's been a containment breach, so there's more letter snippets this chapter, whoops.
>
> Now – meme time
> Cloud: X X X X X X X
> Snowy: X
> Surya: X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dirt is spongey and slightly wet beneath Izuku's knees. A chill eats through the denim of his jeans, prickling against his skin as a breeze raises the hair on his arms. The smell of the earth is gentle and soothing. The grass is springy, green, and well-manicured. Everything is hushed, near silent.

It is a good place to rest, Izuku thinks. There is a body beneath him, resting eternally.

Is it as peaceful as it seems? Or does she toss and turn, churning up soil with stiff limbs?

Beneath his fingers, the tombstone is glossy and smooth. Letters are carved into the rock, deep and bold, the edges slightly rounded over. He traces the characters, slow and methodical, lets the message sink through his skin to his soul.

Midoriya Inko.

Loving friend and mother.

She was only 32 when she died, the headstone says. Somehow, Izuku didn't know that. When he was ten years old, his mother was still some ageless, super-human entity to him. He knew her birthday, sure, but he hadn't understood that she had been a *child* once, just like him.

That she had been born.

That she would die.

If only he knew then what he knows now.

The quiet in the graveyard is the kind that feels like it can't be broken. Even the soft sounds of nature are muted, leaves murmuring low and unobtrusive out of respect for the dead. Anything Izuku might want to say feels like it is being scared back down his throat, all his words knotting together in his chest with nowhere else to go.

His fingers feel slightly numb, but Izuku's hands don't shake as he fishes his mother's locket out of his shirt and pulls it over his head. It's blood-warm in his palm. He strokes his thumb over the hinge; the two halves align slightly crooked. The metal is dull and dented, hardly shining beneath the light of the overcast sky. The chord doesn't match.

The original chain had broken years ago. Izuku doesn't remember how it happened, but he remembers closing himself up in his room and crying on and off for over a day, he was so brokenhearted. He had hidden the locket at the back of a drawer at first, tucked away behind his socks because he couldn't stand looking at it, but then he fished it back out and strung it on the wire from a pair of broken earbuds and told himself that was good enough. A couple of days later, he found a silver chain on his desk – thin and delicate, but sturdy and high quality. Izuku thinks it was Kurogiri who put it there. The man never said anything about it, but he was always doing things like that, small gestures that showed he was paying attention.

Izuku closes his eyes, closes his hand around the locket, and forcibly redirects his thoughts. Of the many ghosts that haunt him, he is here for one in particular, and she deserves his full attention.

Loving friend and mother.

"I love you," Izuku finally says, "and I miss you." Whispered, the words still sound too loud, popping the fragile bubble of serenity that floats around this place, but they spill out like water set loose as soon as he opens his mouth. He continues, "People always say the d-dead

are watching over us… I – I hope you haven't been. You always told me there was nothing w-wrong with me. That I was a g-good person. I – I don't… I hope I haven't t-taken that away from you.

"It's been – hard. And I – I haven't always been… good. I've been – you'd be dis-disappointed, I think." He swallows roughly, digging a nail into the seam of the locket. He can't see the embossed details of it through the fog of tears in his eyes. "But I'm trying, now. I'm really, really t-trying. W-watch me. I'll be someone you can be p-proud of again."

Grass and leaves rustle in the background as Aunt Mitsuki and Mic, standing a polite distance away, move forward. Aunt Mitsuki removes her jacket, laying it on the ground to form a barrier against the chilled dampness of the ground as she sits. Mic crouches down, laying his arms over his knees.

"Your mother, she loved being pregnant," Aunt Mitsuki says, looking from Izuku to the headstone with sad fondness filling her eyes. "She had that whole cliché glowy bullshit going on for her. Me, I just threw up a lot. So, when you were born, I'll admit that a part of me was spitefully glad. Katsuki was around two months old, crying and shitting nonstop, sleeping all day except when *I* wanted to sleep – then the little brat was wide awake and needing something. I was tired and grouchy, and sadistically pleased that Inko would be dragged into the hell of having a newborn right alongside me. Misery loves company and all that.

"Except she wasn't miserable. If anything, she only got *happier* after you were born. She glowed even brighter. Which seemed fucking impossible to me. I was raising a baby of my own and I was lucky enough to have a doting husband to help me – I had no idea how she could be so happy doing it all on her own. And I thought – fuck, she must have had some kind of miracle angel baby." Aunt Mitsuki smiles, eyes unfocused. "I mean, she always seemed like a bit of an angel herself, so I thought it would make sense.

"Then," she continues, smile quirking wryly, "Masaru and I babysat you for the first time. And sorry to break it to you, Izu, but you were no angel. Hell, you made *Katsuki* look like an angel. You cried *constantly*. At first, I thought it was me. Maybe I was just bad with kids – that wouldn't exactly have come as a surprise. But no, Inko told me later that you were just *like that*. The fussiest baby ever. And I saw enough evidence over the first couple of years to believe it.

“Of course, Inko never seemed to mind. She just loved you *so much*. She didn’t care when you kept her up all night. She didn’t get frustrated when you screamed yourself red in the face, like a wrinkled little tomato. She was so happy to hold you, to watch you grow. Nothing could dent that for her. Honestly, it was kind of beautiful to see.” Teasing, Aunt Mitsuki nudges an elbow into Izuku’s side, “As long as I wasn’t the one who had to deal with your crying.

“The point is, your mother loved you. More than anything. More than I even realized was possible. Somedays, I thought she must have had a secret second quirk to love you the way she did. I’m not stupid – I know there’s more to your story than Scarf Man said. That’s fine. As long as you’re happy and safe, I don’t need all the details right now. And I don’t need them to know that Inko was, is, and always will be proud of you, Izuku.”

Izuku bites his lip, breathing carefully around the tears that well up against his eyes and clog his throat. He presses the backs of his hands against his eyes, cool skin soothing against the raw, irritated heat of his eyelids.

Loving friend and mother.

For the first time, Izuku resents having his quirk suppressed. His mother’s headstone looks barren, a cold grey monolith poorly serving memorial for such a warm and colorful life. If he could, he would make her flowers. She liked tulips best – loved the shape of them, the colors, the huge, picturesque fields where they were grown. The cuffs around Izuku’s wrists are usually unobtrusive, familiar enough to fade from his notice, but now they feel cold and heavy.

“There’s a lot to be proud of,” Mic says. Izuku startles at the unexpected break in the silence, looking over. Mic doesn’t meet Izuku’s eyes, addressing the headstone with an uncharacteristic lack of levity. “You raised an amazing boy, Ms. Midoriya. He’s strong and brave and kind. The world is lucky to have someone like Izuku. I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to take care of him, to protect and guide him in your absence. Keep watching,” he says, echoing Izuku’s own words, “your son is going places.”

Mic turns to Izuku, his smile gentle but strong in conviction. Izuku can only stare. Aunt Mitsuki is staring as well, attentively soaking in every detail of Mic’s words and actions. With a wink, Mic reaches over to ruffle Izuku’s hair, breaking some of the tension in the air, but Izuku is still reeling.

From their first interaction, Izuku had Mic pegged, and that impression has only been strengthened by the time they have spent together since. Mic is a good man – caring and empathetic, forgiving and optimistic. A touch naïve. As a hero, he is certainly invested in Izuku's rehabilitation, but this is – this is too much.

No one is *lucky* to have someone like Izuku. Almost everyone is worse off for having met him.

Mic and Eraser, who suffered through the loss of Eraser's quirk and subsequent invasion of their home. Izuku's mother, whose body is cold beneath them. Katsuki, who lost his quirk and his sense of security along with it. Aunt Mitsuki and Uncle Masaru, with a son who couldn't tell them about one of the most important events in his life. Tomura and Kurogiri, betrayed and abandoned. Izuku's father.

Izuku wonders if his father had a funeral. What did Tomura and Kurogiri do with the body? How did they mourn? Did he get a eulogy? Was he buried? Does he have a grave somewhere?

If he does, it must be unmarked. Izuku imagines it overgrown with weeds, forgotten by everyone but the decomposers that make new life from old death. There is no carefully polished tombstone for Shigaraki Hisashi. No flowers for a super villain. Did his father have a favorite flower? No epitaph. What would it even say?

Shigaraki Hisashi.

Loving leader and father.

No. Kurogiri probably burned him. Less evidence that way. All that's left is ash and memories that taste like it.

Dear Mom,

I don't actually know how you died. I think someone must have told me, but all I remember is *your mother has been in an accident*. All the old news reports say is that a villain attacked the hospital. Did they kill you? Were you crushed? Caught in the crossfire of hero intervention? However it happened, I hope it was quick, painless. But I don't actually know.

I know why, though. I used to ask all the time – why you, why us, why then, why that, *why, why, why?* I think I was around thirteen when I figured it out. You died because All for One wanted you to. Because I did something terrible, and you were trying to protect me. Because we were going to go to the US. Because that's where Dad was supposed to be, but he wasn't, and he never had been. Because he couldn't let you take me away.

Three days later, you got caught in an accident.

Well, I guess I can't say I *know*. I never actually confirmed it. I was too afraid to ask. Too afraid of the answer. Most days, it already hurt enough to love him. How could I love him if I knew for sure? And how could I keep going if I stopped loving him?

Maybe it was a coincidence, but people like All for One teach you not to believe in those. Spiders in webs don't happen upon their prey by accident. Everything happens for a reason. Not good, divine, hopeful reasons. No. Usually, the reason is just that someone, somewhere, *wanted* it to happen.

Death is the only solution some people understand.

I'm sorry. I should have asked. You deserved at least that much from me.

Shouta picks a random point near the wall of the Bakugous' living room. He stares at the brass handle of a side table drawer and sits completely still. It's fidgeting in reverse – just as uncomfortable, just as awkward, and just as telling if someone knows what they're looking for. Luckily for Shouta, the majority of civilians aren't particularly good at reading atypical body language, so he can usually get away with looking tired and aloof instead of painfully out of his depth. Across from him, Mr. Bakugou fidgets fully, crossing and uncrossing his legs, rubbing his palms over his knees.

Shouta never should have let Hizashi leave. That was a gross oversight on his part. Mr. Bakugou is clearly confused by the exchange that just took place in his living room. Shouta can't blame him – the history between their kids is complex and apparently a complete mystery to the Bakugous. But it's not Shouta's place to explain the old and new

trauma their son has been through or the myriad of ways that may be affecting him. Trying to do so would be treading precariously along lines of confidentiality. Hizashi would know what to say.

Shouta, on the other hand, *doesn't*, nor does he particularly care to fumble around and try to figure it out. He would much prefer for them to mutually agree to sit here in silence until Hizashi and Izuku return. Judging by Mr. Bakugou's increased shifting and shuffling, such a hope is futile.

Redirecting his attention from the corner of the room, Shouta's eyes fall on the coffee table in front of him, seeking a distraction. There's a bottom shelf with several books and magazines laid out, but there are two large, square volumes on top, one blue and one red, both with golden gilt along their spines and the edges of their covers.

He clears his throat, nodding towards the books. "What are those?" he asks, bland and stilted.

"Oh! Photo albums. Feel free to have a look – Mitsuki got them out for Izukun. That was her original plan for this afternoon. She spent all night gathering photos from all around to put in for him. We figured he probably didn't have many photos of his mother."

Shouta reaches forward, snagging the red book, the thicker of the two, and dragging it into his lap. Cracking it open to a random page in the middle, he is greeted by the beaming face of a young woman. Shouta has only seen a handful of pictures of Midoriya Inko, but he suspects that he would have recognized her even without any prior knowledge. Her features are soft and round, the spitting image of her son, with the same wide, expressive eyes sparkling in her face. Forest green hair, not as dark as Izuku's near-black, half pulled into a bun, the rest curling loosely down her shoulders. She stands, laughing, one hand hovering over her mouth, besides a younger Bakugou Mitsuki. Shouta has seen echoes of her smile in Izuku's, bright and arresting.

"Our wedding," Mr. Bakugou says, leaning forward in his seat so he can see what image Shouta has landed on. "Inko was Mitsuki's maid of honor. They probably spent more time together that night than my wife did with me." Despite his words, there's no jealousy in his voice. The smile on his face is nostalgic and fond, only slightly scuffed by persisting grief.

"They were close," Shouta observes unnecessarily as he flips to the beginning of the album.

The very first picture is of Ms. Midoriya on her own, sitting on a couch with her feet tucked beneath her. She has a book spread across her lap, but is glancing towards the camera, eyes wide, red face half-hidden behind the curtain of her hair. She can't be older than fifteen.

"Incredibly," Mr. Bakugou replies. "More like sisters than friends, really. They met in high school. Mitsuki was a few years older, but she got attached to Inko immediately. And when Mitsuki gets attached, there's no escaping."

Escaping seemed to be a good word. The first few pages of the album are filled with pictures of Ms. Midoriya, with and without Mrs. Bakugou, looking incredibly anxious either way. She blushes and stammers and hides her face, shying away from the camera. As the pages turn, she starts smiling, hesitantly at first, then brighter and brighter until she shines from behind ink and plastic protection.

"I met them in college," Mr. Bakugou says as years pass by with simple movements of Shouta's hands. "Probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Mitsuki, obviously, I love dearly. Never would have imagined marrying her when we first met, but, well – she gets attached. And Inko. She was a gem." She grins in one photo, the leaves of a flower crown blending neatly into the green of her hair. "She was always shy, anxious. Mitsuki took it upon herself to act as her protector. Not that Inko needed it, really. She wasn't brash or bold, but she was plenty strong, in her own, understated ways. I always admired that about her."

On the next page, Ms. Midoriya stands between Mrs. Bakugou and a man who Shouta has never seen before, but recognizes instinctually. All three of them are smiling – Ms. Midoriya, wide and sincere, Mrs. Bakugou, strained, and the man… Perhaps it's confirmation bias, but there is something insidious in his smile, a thin veneer over dangerous depths.

Izuku looks a lot like his father, Shouta acknowledges. The dark mess of his hair, the freckles covering his cheeks. But his smile – he got that from his mother.

"Akatani," Mr. Bakugou says after a heavy pause. "Hisashi. I didn't know him very well. None of us did, I suppose. There's only a photo of two of him in there, I can take them out–" He reaches out for the album, but Shouta pulls it away.

"He doesn't have *any* photos of his father," Shouta says, still staring at

the immortalized face of the boogey man that terrorized Japan from the shadows for centuries. Knowing what he will do, *has done*, Shigaraki Hisashi looks far too innocuous.

“I… assumed he wouldn’t want any, given what you told us today.”

“Maybe he won’t,” Shouta agrees, “but he might. Either way, he can make that choice for himself. The man was still his father, regardless of whether he was a good one, and the kid loved him.” The words are sour on Shouta’s tongue and heavy in his chest. “There’s no point in trying to erase history.”

Silently, Shouta continues moving through the pictures. There is, in fact, one more photo of Shigaraki, though he is only in the background. Shouta flips past it.

Eventually, Mr. Bakugou clears his throat and resumes his commentary. “Pregnancy somehow brought them even closer. Especially after Akatani… left. Mitsuki was terrified to find out she was going to be a mother, but the moment Inko showed up at our door, sobbing and laughing with her test still in hand, Mitsuki found her own resolve.”

On the page, Ms. Midoriya is caught up in Mrs. Bakugou’s arms. They sit on the floor, legs clumsily tangled together, like they crashed down because they couldn’t stay standing. Mrs. Bakugou clings like a limpet, her cheek, shining with tears, squished against Ms. Midoriya’s shoulder. Ms. Midoriya has one of her own arms wrapped around Mrs. Bakugou’s back, the other reaching toward the camera, palm up in invitation. Shouta imagines that Mr. Bakugou, presumably the one taking the photo, soon found himself dragged into that embrace.

Shouta is stuck on that picture, fixated on the elation of a moment more than fifteen years in the past. His thoughts are only diverted when the front door opens, slamming forcefully shut a moment later.

“We’re back!” Mrs. Bakugou calls. A moment later, the group enters the living room. Izuku trails behind the adults, eyes hazy and directed towards the floor. Shouta looks him over with added perspective and finds himself just a little more appreciative than he was an hour ago. This kid has been through so much, has so much potential, and he brought so much joy into the world just by existing.

“How are you feeling?” Shouta asks. Izuku glances up and shrugs half-heartedly.

“I’m feeling.” He sounds subdued, but he musters a small smile for Shouta’s sake. Unconsciously, Shouta smiles back.

“Whatcha got there?” Hizashi asks, sliding onto the couch. He leans against Shouta’s shoulder, peering at the album, and then muffles a noise that cuts off somewhere in his throat against Shouta’s neck. Hizashi pulls back, covering his mouth with both hands for a long second, before squeaking at an inhumanly high pitch, but a tolerable volume, at least.

“Oh, so you found the photo albums, then,” Mrs. Bakugou says, side eying Hizashi as he steals the album from Shouta’s lap into his own. Izuku creeps forward, curiosity breaking through the lethargy of his expression like the sun through clouds. Catching sight of the page, he makes a choked noise of his own, plastering himself against Hizashi’s side without a second thought as he slots onto the couch. Hizashi lifts an arm so the kid can slide under it, shifting the book so it rests on both their legs. The excitement in Zashi’s eyes is clear when he catches Shouta’s gaze, but he nobly refrains from bouncing in place or otherwise calling unnecessary attention to the contact. Mrs. Bakugou folds her arms on top of the back of the couch, looking over their heads.

“That’s the day we found out about you,” she says, ruffling Izuku’s hair. “Never knew someone could be as happy as Inko was that day. Of course, she set a new record when you were born.”

“I thought she would never stop crying,” Mr. Bakugou recalls, coming to his wife’s side.

“They were good tears.”

Nestled against Hizashi’s side, Izuku nods. He pays no mind to the tears spilling from his own eyes, tracing a reverent finger over his mother’s extended hand. All five of them linger there for a long moment before Hizashi starts turning the pages, Midoriya Inko growing more pregnant and more luminous as they go. Little fragments caught in time; moments suspended in amber. Izuku is riveted by each one, devouring every last picture with hungry eyes.

And then Izuku is there in the photos, too.

Shouta has never found babies cute. They’re too small, their proportions make him uncomfortable, and they’re generally blotchy and oddly colored. Freakish little alien creatures that everyone swoons over. It baffles him, really. Izuku, it turns out, wasn’t any kind of

exception. In the photo, he is cradled in Mrs. Bakugou's arms while she sits on the edge of Ms. Midoriya's hospital bed. Out of focus in the background, Ms. Midoriya is exhausted and disheveled, but smiling radiantly as she brushes the back of her knuckles over her son's head. Baby Izuku's face is red and scrunched, hair a stringy mess of indeterminate color, eyes buggy and foggy, mouth open and tongue sticking out slightly. Babies are ugly, and Izuku was an ugly baby.

Still, Shouta feels a vague affection bubble up in his chest, a turbulent feeling that mixes with several varieties of regret. Regret knowing what that little baby is going to go through. Regret for all the happiness saturating the moment, happiness that won't last forever. More disconcerting still, regret at the abrupt and heavy realization of fifteen years of life that Shouta has hardly any awareness of.

"Shouta!" Zashi says, voice thin and high but tightly controlled. "Look at him!"

"I'm looking," Shouta says dryly.

"The littlest listener!"

"I don't think he was listening to much of anything when he was that fresh."

"What – *fresh?* Sho, you don't call babies fresh."

"Do you have a better word, then?"

"How about *young?*"

Shouta shakes his head, unimpressed. "A two-year-old is young." He jabs a finger at the photo. "That's *fresh.*"

"I hate you. Why are you like this?"

Shouta snorts, ignoring the question. Izuku, equally ignoring them both, pushes Hizashi's hand out of the way so he can turn the page himself. At this point in the album, many of the pictures focus on the two children, documenting their growth. Izuku skims through pages and pages of him and baby Bakugou – on playmats, in jumpers and walkers, with toys, staring at each other with fuzzy infant awareness – searching for photos that contain his mother. She's still in a fair few of them, either as a focus or in the background, but once the children get to be about four or so, there's a drastic decline in material. Large stretches of time obviously separate subsequent entries.

And then they reach the end. The last four pages of the album are empty.

Immediately, Izuku flips back to the beginning. While Izuku and Hizashi pour over pictures Shouta has already seen, he reaches for the second album. Another ugly baby picture greets him. Leafing through the pages shows more of the same but reveals a distinct difference between this album and the last. The album still clutched in Izuku's hands shared pieces of both Midoriyas, as their family entwined with the Bakugous. All the photos contained Ms. Midoriya and/or Izuku, but the majority also contained Mrs. Bakugou and later, her son. This blue album, on the other hand, is all about Izuku. Even Midoriya Inko is hardly in the pages, most likely because she's the one behind the camera for nearly all the shots.

"Hey Scarf Man." Shouta quirks an eyebrow, looking away from the album, up at Mrs. Bakugou. "Let's talk," she says, jerking her chin towards the kitchen. Hizashi smiles when Shouta meets his eyes, so Shouta carefully places the photo album back on the coffee table before standing to follow her from the room. She leans against the counter, crossing her arms in front of her and scanning Shouta over. He stands in the middle of the room, one hand tangled casually in the loops of his capture weapon while he waits for her to speak.

"I want to know what your deal is," she says bluntly, glaring in a way that most people would probably find intimidating. Shouta, unaffected, can at least appreciate the firm and straight forward way she speaks. "I've already got a read on your pal out there–"

"He's my husband," Shouta interrupts. "We're married."

Mrs. Bakugou blinks. "Oh. That makes sense. Well, whatever, that's not the point. What's your deal?"

"My deal?"

"That's what I fucking said, isn't it? I want what's best for Izuku. I would take him in myself if I could, but I think there's more than one reason that that wouldn't work. If he's going to be staying with you, I'm going to damn well make sure that *you* want what's best for him, too."

"Ah," Shouta says, understanding dawning on him. "Of course I do. It's my job to take care of him, and I assure you Mrs. Bakugou, I take my job very seriously."

She narrows her eyes. “Bullshit,” she barks. Shouta blinks. “You’ve got a kid, now. I know people say that parenting is a full-time job, and they’re right, but if that’s all it is to you, we’re going to have a problem.”

“He’s not my kid,” Shouta says. The words sound callous and apathetic, making him wince internally, but the distinction feels incredibly important. “I mean, I’m not his parent.”

“Fucking semantics,” Mrs. Bakugou dismisses with a wave of her hand. “You’re feeding him, clothing him, housing him, right?” Shouta nods. “Then you’re raising him. Newsflash, that’s all parenting is, doesn’t matter if you’re his actual parent or not. I want to know that you’re gonna do this shit right. I want to know if you’re gonna care *about* him or just *for* him, understand?”

“I’ve only known him for a few weeks,” Shouta says, brain still stupidly caught on *you’ve got a kid, now*.

She scoffs, “So what? Inko knew a bundle of cells for less than an hour, and she was already willing to kill and die for him. That’s what Izuku *deserves*.” Shouta stands very still, resolutely not gaping at Mrs. Bakugou. At least, not in a way she can recognize. She sighs. “Look. He’s a ward of UA or whatever, alright. But let’s say he wasn’t. Let’s say that tomorrow whoever is calling the shots decides to release him into the system. Not your job anymore, your job’s done. What would you do?”

It feels alien to consider. Not impossible, no, but – like an alternate reality, a parallel universe. Shouta can easily imagine a world where Izuku is somewhere else. Maybe the Commission, maybe Yagi, maybe some random foster family. He can see how these different situations may have come about. But when he tries to apply that logic to *here*, to *this life*, something freezes up, the gears of his thoughts catching and grinding to a halt.

Shouta hears himself say, “We would adopt him.”

“Well then, welcome to parenthood,” Mrs. Bakugou says with a sharp grin. “Call me Mitsuki. I’m not going anywhere, so there’s no point with the formalities. What was your name again?”

“…Aizawa Shouta.”

“Shouta, right. Shouta, Shouta, Shouta. Gonna have to remember that one. We’re practically family now, after all.”

Dear Tomura,

I want to hit you in the head with a bat to get through your thick skull! How can one person be so endlessly frustrating?! You're smart but you're so stupid! He's dead!! He's dead, and that's –

A lot of the time, I think I've made really bad choices. But sometimes, I wonder if maybe it wasn't me, maybe it was the *options* that were bad. Whenever I start to think things like that, like maybe everything that happened wasn't my fault, I feel guilty. But then I think of you and all the people who would say that you're making bad choices, awful choices, when I know for a fact that you have never *had* a choice.

Until now.

I gave you a choice. *I gave you one!* You can do something else now!!

Please do something *else*.

I'm sorry he's dead. Really, I am. I'm so fucking sorry, all the time, because I know you're hurt, and I'm hurt too, and all I can be about that is *sorry*. I know he was important to you, I know, but you didn't mean shit to him! And I'm sorry for that, too, because you deserve so much more than that, but *he* doesn't deserve your loyalty. He doesn't deserve your loyalty, or your affection, or your revenge.

Because this isn't about him!! It's not about him or me or anyone else – it's about *you*, Tomura! Don't bother doing what you think a dead man would have wanted. What do *you* want?

What *do* you want?

I don't actually know. And that's fucking terrifying. Maybe you actually want me dead. Maybe I've given you a choice and that's really what you're going to do with it. Maybe you don't know how to want anything else, anymore. Maybe you don't want to be saved.

God, Tomura, please. Please. *Please*–

Izuku is starting to recognize himself again.

The uniform still seems to fit him oddly, and he still doesn't know how to tie a tie, and there are still bags under his eyes, but the wrongness of it is being gradually worn away with repetition. Every morning, he takes a moment to stare at his reflection and remind himself that this is real, that this is him, that life continues undeterrably onwards and he is continuing on with it. He flicks a piece of confetti off his shoulder and turns back to Lucy, snoozing in his favorite spot on the middle of Izuku's bed.

"Gonna wish me luck?" Izuku asks. Lucy, of course, doesn't reply, curled up in featureless white ball of fluff. Izuku pats the covers a couple of times, gaining Lucy's attention, a head emerging from the cloud of fur. "Wish me luck," Izuku says when Lucy looks at him. Lucy chirps.

It's an inane interaction. Lucy always makes noises when he realizes someone is speaking to him. It's not like the cat has any idea what's going on, not the faintest notion of all the monumental ways Izuku's life is changing so rapidly. Still, the little sound calms some of the nerves rampaging in Izuku's gut. Lucy twists on the bed, uncurling and wiggling around until his head is close enough to Izuku's hand to demand affection. Compliantly, Izuku cups Lucy's face between his palms, rubbing and scratching behind the cat's ears and along his neck.

As if sensing the soothing moment, Bastard interrupts, yowling and sticking a paw through the open crack of Izuku's door. A wide amber eye glares at him accusingly as she mutters something nonsensical. Giving Lucy a final scratch, Izuku opens the door fully, allowing Bastard to nip the hem of his pants before she darts back towards the kitchen. He follows at a more sedate pace, hesitating only briefly before taking his now-usual seat next to Eraser.

The hero takes one look at Izuku, glowers, and says, "No."

Izuku blanches. "No?" he echoes, fumbling the chopsticks he had just picked up.

"No," Eraser affirms. "You're not leaving the apartment like that." He twists on his stool until he is facing Izuku fully, gesturing for Izuku to do the same. "Now that I can actually use my arms again, it's time for you to learn how to tie a damn tie."

“Aw, come on Sho!” Mic says, leaning over the counter to poke Eraser in the side of his head. “The little listener has a style! I think it’s cute!”

Eraser glares. “You’re a dirty enabler. Undo that monstrosity,” he says to Izuku, more order than request. “I’ll show you how it’s done.”

“You don’t even wear ties,” Mic says while Izuku does as he was told.

“That’s because they’re terrible and I hate them. I gained the right to forsake ties when I made it in the underground.”

“Such a hobo,” Mic sighs. “Why do I always have to be the arm candy in this relationship?”

“Boo-hoo, you’re too pretty.”

Mic and Eraser continue to bicker back and forth while Eraser walks Izuku through the steps to make his tie presentable. Izuku looks down at himself doubtfully when it’s done. The knot is definitely smaller and neater, laying nearly flat against Izuku’s collar, but the tie hangs far lower than he is used to. He tugs at it, feeling the answering tension around his neck. It seems like a bit of a hazard, if he’s being honest. He glances from the tie to Eraser and back again.

“I, um – I kind of liked it better the other way?”

Mic laughs uproariously as Eraser’s head smacks against the counter. Izuku fiddles with the strip of fabric, darting looks between the two. Eraser has gone seemingly catatonic, hair covering his face. Still laughing, Mic rounds the counter, standing behind Eraser and dragging the other man back into an embrace by the shoulders. Limp, Eraser allows it to happen, but scowls fiercely at nothing to convey his discontent.

“Redo it however you like, Sprout,” Mic says, resting his chin on the top of Eraser’s head. “You’re not technically breaking dress code, so you do you! It’s *your* uniform, *your* tie, *your first day!*” For the sake of Mic’s enthusiasm, Izuku manages a weak smile, but the words bring a fresh swell of anxiety, his stomach writhing like Bastard forced into a hug.

“Everything’ll be fine, kid,” Eraser says. “1-A is a good group, and you’ve already met half of them. They won’t give you any issues, and if they try, I’ll put a stop to it.”

In general, Eraser is not half as comforting as Mic. He doesn’t even try

to be, preferring to let Mic take point on anything that might delve into messy emotional territory. In spite of this – or maybe because of it – Eraser's reassurance settles Izuku's worries with admirable efficiency. With Eraser, there is little comfort for comfort's sake. There is no careful encouragement in his tone, only factual confidence. Rational and logical, the kind of thing Izuku can believe in without needing to have *faith* in anything.

"Ready to face the day, Greenbean?" Mic asks.

Izuku still can't say *yes* and mean it. But the truthful answer's not *no*, either, not anymore. He takes a deep breath.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Dear to someone,

You are a work in progress. Subject to change. Game footage not final.

I won't pretend that you're perfect because you're not. You never will be. You're very not perfect. But there is still time to improve. We are all shaped by our choices, and there's still plenty left to make. Sometimes those choices will be the wrong ones, but you'll have more chances to get other things right in the future. And either way, you can live with it. You *will* live with it.

I am the only person who will ever read this, but there's something I think everyone needs to hear, you and I included. It's hard to really believe it, sometimes, but that's all the more reason to say it, often and loudly.

Remember:

You are better than the worst thing that you have ever done. And you are stronger than the worst thing that has ever been done to you.

Chapter End Notes

> Aizawa: Holy shit, we're parents.
> Mic: Just now figuring that out, huh? You always were a little slow on the uptake.
> Aizawa: The kid. He's *our* kid??

Mic: Mhmm, you're doing great sweetie!

Izuku: I actually liked my tie better the other way
Aizawa: I'm glad that you're asserting yourself! Pick something else to have an opinion on.

Izuku: I am the only person who will ever read this.
Me: *sweating, trying not to think about how many fucking people are reading this*

Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part I
Update: Jun 3 or Jun 10
This seems like a good note to leave things on for a little pause. I'll be taking a week or two off to give myself a break and (hopefully) get the next arc organized. IGG'll be back soon, but if you want to stay in the know about any changes that may be made to that schedule, join the Discord!

Brainwashing - Part I

Chapter Notes

> We're back, thank you for your patience! Welcome to Hitoshi's chapter, we're kicking it off with, well -- a lot of Hitoshi. Also, you'll probably notice, but we're briefly backtracking to the day after the festival for this part.
>
> Brainwashing will be a bit of a change of pace. The characters! The relationships!! My EVENTUAL SHINDEKU!!! They must *develop.* I will once again be wrestling with pacing, my eternal enemy. Let's see how this goes down, shall we?
>
> Discord memes!
> Cloud: X X X X X
> Soft: X X X X
> Surya: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a welcome change of pace, Hitoshi sleeps like the dead. Not so welcome is the waking up. His whole body is sore and stiff in ways he didn't realize it could be, his mouth tastes like something died under his tongue, and his eyes resist creaking open, like doors with rusted-over hinges. Bright light streams through the crack of his curtains, telling Hitoshi that the day is already well on its way – exactly what day it is is a mystery though, because as far as Hitoshi is concerned, he could have slept a handful of years just as easily as hours.

Hitoshi turns his face further into his pillows to spare his tender eyes from the sun, reaching blindly for his phone. His arm doesn't respond quite as intended, knocking into the corner of his bedside table before flopping onto it like a dead fish with another clumsy movement. It's embarrassingly uncoordinated, even with no one around to bear witness, and pathetically painful.

Hitoshi's protesting hiss is muffled by his pillow as he finally closes uncooperative fingers around his phone, bringing it close to his face to squint at the time. 10:08 in the morning. And Hitoshi went to sleep – when? Well, he got home after the festival, raided the kitchen for anything that required minimal effort to shove in his face, and then immediately crashed. He can't remember his dad ever coming home, so he must have been out before six. Sixteen hours of sleep then, as a

conservative estimate.

Hitoshi drops his phone next to his head and considers letting himself drift off again.

Sixteen hours or not, he definitely could go straight back to sleep, as exhausted as he is. After exerting himself more yesterday than he has in his entire life combined up to this point, just so much as moving his arm and doing a bit of simple mental math have already left him feeling freshly drained and wrung out. He could probably sleep right through the weekend and still amble into class like a zombie come Monday.

A clatter comes from the kitchen, loud enough that Hitoshi would have jumped if his limbs weren't currently comprised of bundles of wet noodles, bound together by ropes of fire. A muffled curse punctuates the ensuing silence. Through walls and doors, the word is indistinct, but it serves as a clear reminder – it's only a matter of time before Hitoshi's father forces him out of bed. Either to eat, or just to make sure he's alive, or – the truly dreaded possibility – to *talk*.

The last time they talked was *awkward*. Hitoshi was on the brink of tears and his father basically had to baby him down from the edge of a breakdown, all without Hitoshi ever explaining *why*. God only knows what explanations his father came up with in his over-analytical therapist brain. Probably shit about how Hitoshi was overwhelmed and not cut out for the hero lifestyle, the exact kinds of conclusions that Hitoshi was supposed to be proving wrong, but what was he supposed to say?

Sorry Dad, but this harmless looking guy I've run into a few times apparently killed his father, contemplated killing himself, and still might because he honestly didn't seem to be doing super well, but I'm not supposed to *know* any of that, I just overheard it like the nosey fucking bastard I am, because it didn't even occur to me that maybe there was a legitimate reason for a private conversation to stay private – or maybe that *did* occur to me, and I just didn't care because I'm a selfish asshole and there was a chance that eavesdropping could have benefit me – that is, until karma decided she's had enough of my shit and kicked me right in the teeth.

Yeah, that would have gone over real well, Hitoshi is sure.

The point is – the *point* is, Hitoshi wants to talk to his father even less than he normally does. Which is saying something because he's

currently is his “rebellious teenaged phase,” according to said father, which means Hitoshi is currently “exploring his independence, categorized by a natural resentment toward authority figures.”

Another clatter – dishes rattling, a cupboard door falling closed – and Hitoshi forces himself into action. His legs feel simultaneously tense and gelatinous as he rolls over and slides them off the side of the bed, heels pulsing as they meet the floor. He dresses carefully in his softest, laziest clothes, babying his aches and pains and moving slowly to avoid letting his father know he’s awake. He opens his bedroom door silently, stealthily sparing half a glance inside the kitchen. The room looks a mess, Hitoshi’s father humming to himself inside, occupied with rummaging through the refrigerator.

Creeping past, Hitoshi leans against the wall by the front door while he slips his shoes on. He pauses then, heart inexplicably pounding. There is an urge to just leave, to slip away unseen and unheard. But he can imagine the look on his father’s face, opening the door to Hitoshi’s room and finding it empty, and Hitoshi feels an intense and entirely unwelcomed guilt at the thought alone.

He swallows the block in his throat, one hand already primed to go on the doorknob and shouts, “I’m going out!”

Dishes clank against each other. “Hitoshi?”

“I’ve got my phone,” Hitoshi calls, hastily pulling the door open.

“Wait–”

“I should be back in an hour or two!”

Hitoshi slams the door shut behind him, shuffling away from his apartment as quickly as he can tolerate. In his jacket pocket, his phone vibrates – once, then twice, before Hitoshi silences it. He goes down the stairs cautiously, one at a time, testing the integrity of his knees with each step, gripping the railing for dear life like a little old lady at risk of blowing out a hip. Only once he’s at the bottom does he pull his phone out, checking his messages with a grimace.

Dad --- 10:26AM

Alrighty then. Good morning to you, too

Just be home for lunch, ok? I have plans!

Stay safe, Jellybean

Heartrate finally calming from hummingbird to human, Hitoshi sighs, scrunching up his nose at the old nickname. He sends a simple thumbs up in reply, sets his music to shuffle, and slips his phone away. When Hitoshi decided to make a break for it, he admittedly didn't have any grand plans on where he was going to go. Now, he sets course for the cat café, an obvious choice considering it's practically the only place besides home or school where he spends any time.

It's a walk that Hitoshi has made dozens of times, at this point. There is a certain hellish novelty today, with his body protesting every step along the way, but it is still familiar and unexciting. Zoning out to the well-worn measures of songs he has heard a thousand times, the metronome pulse of blood through his limbs keeping time, Hitoshi pays no attention to the people around him until he nearly runs into one of them.

A young boy is dragged out of Hitoshi's path by an older woman, probably his mother. Hitoshi, only noticing the kid a second before they would have collided hunches his shoulders up and mutters an apology, stepping to the side to put more room between them. The boy bounces back in Hitoshi direction, pointing and babbling something to his mother, who meets Hitoshi's eyes and points to her ears.

Hesitantly, Hitoshi removes his earbuds in time to hear the boy shout, "UA!"

The mother smiles. "Sorry, are you Shinsou Hitoshi?"

"Huh?" Hitoshi asks.

"You're the boy who won the first-year sports festival, aren't you?"

"Oh, uh, yeah? I mean, yes, I am."

"I told you so!" the boy yells, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet. His mother places a hand on his head, smiling turning from polite to fond. "You beat that blasty shouty guy! He was scary!"

Thoughtlessly, Hitoshi agrees, "Yeah, he was." The mother hides a small laugh behind her hand and Hitoshi flushes, shifting from foot to foot as his hands ball into fists in his pockets.

"Congratulations," she says kindly.

“Congralation!” the boy parrots poorly. “When I’m big, I’m gonna win the sports fes’val too!”

“Good luck,” Hitoshi offers when the boy stares at him expectantly. As lame as the words are, coming out sounding more like a question than an encouragement, the kid grins, showing off the gaps between his teeth.

“Thank you,” the woman says, the gratitude in her voice sincere and, in Hitoshi’s opinion, disproportionate. “Now come on, Aki, Daddy’s waiting for us.”

“Daddy!” the boy cheers, running ahead.

“Have a nice day,” the mother says before following after him.

“You too,” Hitoshi returns, a second too late as she’s already gone, calling for her exuberant son. For a moment, Hitoshi stares after them, watching as the woman catches up to the boy and reels him to her side.

Hitoshi’s mouth purses around a grin, rubbing his hand over the heated back of his neck. He turns away, putting his music back on but keeping his eyes on the scattering of people walking around him. How many of them recognize him, now? How many people are thinking about Shinsou Hitoshi today, who didn’t even know he existed this time yesterday?

The thought is as horrifying as it is wonderful, pride and validation filling his chest just as insecure paranoia crawls across his skin. After deliberately flying under the radar for so long, Hitoshi isn’t accustomed to any attention, much less the *positive* variety. He pulls his hood up, and as oversized as his jacket is, it creates shadows that he can sink into, keeping his head down for the rest of his walk.

“Hello and welcome!” the girl behind the register greets as the bells over the café door announces Hitoshi’s arrival. Hitoshi glances around, taking note of the few other customers seated around the place before removing his hood, running a hand through the disarray of his hair.

“Shinsou!”

Hitoshi jumps slightly, looking to the girl who is now leaning half over the counter. As surreptitiously as he can, he glances at her name tag. Sonoda Teruko, right. You’d think he’d be able to remember her name by now, but no. He can remember the exact words she said to

him the last time he was here – *it's an encouragement muffin, plus ultra and all that, I'll be rooting for you* – but her name always escapes him.

"Uh, good morning," he mumbles. Sonoda grins as if he has said something worthwhile.

"You want your usual?" she asks. "It's on the house!"

"What? Why?" Hitoshi blinks, scanning over the papers pasted around the counter and the boards behind it, wondering if he has missed some sort of event or promotion.

Sonoda laughs. "Because you *won*, duh!"

"You saw that?"

"Of course I did!"

Okay, that was admittedly a very stupid question on Hitoshi's part. Nearly everyone watches the sports festival and Sonoda had *told* him that she would be the last time he was here – another thing he specifically remembers in place of her name. Blood prickles in the tips of his ears as Sonoda laughs again.

Jesus christ she must have seen him break his hand on that blonde asshole's face. The whole country did. And they all saw Bakugou make an absolute joke of him, only for Hitoshi to win by flopping about like a brat throwing a tantrum. Sure, they also all saw him standing in first place on the podium with a gold metal around his neck, but his nose had started bleeding again partway through the ceremony and his shirt collar was already stained beyond any hope of repair and he had probably looked like absolute shit.

"So, the usual?" Sonoda prompts.

"Right. Yeah, uh, that'd be good." Belatedly, he adds, "Thanks." He stands there for another awkward moment, wondering how the hell he is meant to disengage without being rude, then makes an awkward gesture behind him. "I'm gonna – yeah." Turning around before any other garbled nonsense can come out of his mouth, Hitoshi lets Sonoda get on with her job while he takes a seat in his usual booth.

Apricat is quick to join him, muscling his way into Hitoshi's lap while Hitoshi takes out his phone and opens up his internet browser. He doesn't even need to do a search to find what he's looking for. Right at the top of his homepage is an article about the sports festival results,

and clicking on it, scrolling down to the section on the first-year festival, shows Hitoshi a photo of the winners' podium. There he is, in high resolution.

"Look," Hitoshi says quietly, holding the screen in front of Apricat's face. "I told you I'd win." Apricat shoves the phone away with a paw, and Hitoshi scratches idly behind the cat's ears while examining the image himself.

He does, in fact, look as bad as he feared. Worse, even. Pale and bloody, with just a hint of smug satisfaction, overshadowed by strain and exhaustion. Bakugou stands in second place with hardly a scratch on him, jaw set with simmering anger, eyes vacant and distant. Shoji and Midoriya share third place, both entirely unreadable. There's a crack on Hitoshi's screen, running right between Midoriya's too-big too-green eyes.

Midoriya should look small, Hitoshi thinks. He's easily the shortest on the podium, on the lowest step, and standing besides Shoji, who makes even *Hitoshi* seem short. It's the perfect combination of circumstances to make Midoriya look tiny, but he doesn't, not to Hitoshi. Maybe it's the extra context Hitoshi has, looking at the picture. Maybe it's something in the way Midoriya holds himself.

Hitoshi locks his phone, tipping his head back against the window with a sigh. Apricat rubs his head against Hitoshi's knee.

"Before you say anything," Sonada says as she approaches the booth, "I know you didn't order it." She puts his drink on the table and places a muffin beside it. She smiles crookedly. "It's a victory muffin."

"Victory muffin," Hitoshi echoes.

Sonoda's smile falters slightly. Some of her playfulness is washed away by nervous discomfort and, as relatable as that may be, Hitoshi grimaces and curses himself for making everything weird. In the future, he really needs to learn how to smile and say *thank you* like a normal person. God, he wishes he could just be a dick all the time, to everyone. That's so much easier.

"Yeah, because you – well, you won," Sonoda explains. "So – victory muffin! It's just – you were super cool, you know. I had no idea you were in general education, but you *still* won. I don't think that's ever happened before! So you deserve a muffin!" With each sentence, she regains confidence, issuing her final words almost like she is daring him to challenge her.

Instead of doing so, Hitoshi says, “Thanks.”

She grins. “You’re welcome! I, uh, well I’ll be at the register. Let me know if you need anything! And congratulations, by the way. You were – you were great!”

While Sonoda returns to work, Hitoshi drags his *victory muffin* closer, smiling to himself, small and private.

A few days ago, his encouragement muffin had tasted bittersweet. It had been kind of pathetically uplifting for Hitoshi, to have someone *encourage* him, to have someone *root for him*. But of course, he had realized that the person rooting for him didn’t actually *know* him, or anything about him. Didn’t know his quirk – and in Hitoshi’s experience, his quirk has always been the breaking point. Now, though, Sonoda must know. Anyone who paid attention to the festival would know. But Sonoda still thought he did *great.* A woman still let her son speak to him on the street. A little boy still heard *good luck* and grinned, like those words, from *Hitoshi*, actually meant something.

It's because he *won*, he knows that. Things would be different if he had placed any lower. Everyone has to fight for respect and recognition, but even more than that, Hitoshi has to fight for decency and kindness. Just for the moment, though, he swallows down the bitterness of that awareness and focuses on the sweetness of having *won*, at least this fight, at least for now.

For the moment, Hitoshi savors his drink and his victory.

When Shouta knocks on the door to the Shinsou’s apartment, he forces himself to feel grateful that he has finally gotten those god forsaken casts off, rather than focusing on how little he wants to be here. It’s great to be able to knock properly on a door after weeks of having his movements restrained. He would really rather not to *have* to knock on any doors at all, but he *can* and that’s the important part.

A second after the door opens, the man behind it raises his eyebrows, curious and assessing. Shouta, realizing belatedly that his attempt to deflect his disdain for home visits has failed, smooths the scowl off his face. The man – Shinsou Toshiyuki – smiles politely in response. He is tall, with the same gravity-defying hair as his son, though his is

shorter and a pale blue color that makes something deep in Shouta's chest twist. There is flour powered across his shirt, and he scans Shouta over with vibrantly purple eyes.

"Dr. Shinsou?" Shouta asks blandly.

"That's me," the man confirms, leaning against the door frame. "How can I help you?"

"Aizawa Shouta. I'm faculty at UA. Can I come in?"

"Of course," Dr. Shinsou agrees, stepping aside to allow Shouta through. "Hitoshi is out right now, but he should be home soon enough. I'm assuming he's why you're here, correct me if I'm wrong."

"You're not."

"Give me a moment and I'll call him," Dr. Shinsou says as he leads Shouta to a small living area. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. Sorry there's not much room, it's usually just the two of us."

As Dr. Shinsou makes his call in the kitchen, Shouta seats himself on the couch and takes the opportunity to take stock of the space. Careful observation is never remiss when making a home visit, but especially with kids like Shinsou, it can save lives. A quirk-based society can be a hard place to live, a place where some people are punished for living at all. Brainwashing has doubtlessly gained Shinsou negative attention through the years, though to what extent, Shouta will have to find out. A home visit, as distasteful as they are, is an excellent starting point for that assessment. Regardless of any ideals about family and unconditional love, homes certainly aren't safe from quirk discrimination.

From what Shouta can tell, the apartment is on the smaller side. Shinsou Toshiyuki, a psychiatrist held in good esteem, could likely afford a larger place, but what they have is still big enough for two people. The place is messy, though not dirty, with papers, books, and the occasional glass scattered around the side tables. The walls are bare, no photos or other decorations hung around or slotted onto shelves.

"Well," Dr. Shinsou says, coming back into the room. "He didn't pick up."

"I can come back another time," Shouta offers, eyeing the man

carefully.

“He should be home soon enough, if you don’t mind waiting. He’ll get sulky if he finds out he missed you. This is about a transfer, isn’t it? He won the festival so now he gets an opportunity to join the hero course.”

“Yes,” Shouta confirms. “I’d rather wait to discuss it until your son is here. I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Maybe it’s for the best that he’s not here at the moment. I have some… doubts about the situation.”

“Oh?” Shouta asks. He tenses only slightly, but Dr. Shinsou clearly catches the change, watching Shouta with sharp and calculative eyes. Shouta watches back. After a moment, the man blinks, looking away, frowning slightly.

“I’m afraid he’s not suited for it.”

Shouta takes a deep breath, keeping his voice level as he begins, “If this is about his quirk–”

“*No,*” Dr. Shinsou interrupts, surprisingly forceful considering how placid he has been so far. “This has *nothing* to do with his quirk. At least, not in the way you’re assuming.”

“What way is it, then?”

Dr. Shinsou rubs a hand over his face, face contorting as he thinks. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Heroics are inexorably tied with quirks,” he says, visibly weighting his words. “I know the quirks of the top 25, at least, right off the top of my head, and I don’t even *care* about those things. There’s a whole sociopolitical structure built around quirks, and heroics is the very *foundation* of that structure. We all live in it, but heroes are *entrenched*. They live and die by their quirks and Hitoshi… with a quirk like his, it feels like digging him a grave.”

“Heroics is an inherently dangerous field,” Shouta agrees, “but your son has an amazing quirk to minimize that risk, both to himself and countless others.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Dr. Shinsou says with a humorless laugh, “but I’m not talking about physical danger here. I have concerns about

that, as well – it's only been a few weeks since half of the hero course got assaulted by villains at the USJ – but I'm talking about his *mental* well-being.

"You are the *first* person who has ever told me that Hitoshi's quirk is amazing. And *don't* misunderstand me, Mr. Aizawa – I fully agree with you. But to everyone else… well, they all call him a villain."

"Quirk discrimination is rampant in our society," Shouta says, intending to show that he understands the issues Dr. Shinsou is wrestling to explain. "But your son *isn't* a villain. He has a chance to be a *hero*. A chance I'm assuming he's been dreaming about for years."

"His entire life," Dr. Shinsou sighs, resigned.

"Not many people are lucky enough to have their dreams come true."

"And when that dream becomes a nightmare?"

Shouta doesn't reply. What is he meant to say to that? When Shouta himself was Shinsou Hitoshi's age, he dreamed of being a hero. Then he became one. And along the way people died – villains, victims, children, friends. Nearly Shouta himself on more than one occasion. Most days he's lucky to get a few hours of sleep before nightmares jolt him awake again. Despite that, Shouta doesn't regret dreaming to be a hero and at the end of the day, he can't even bring himself to regret waking up, opening his eyes to reality, even as painful as it is. He doubts a parent would find any comfort in that, though.

"You know," Dr. Shinsou says softly, "everyone cares what other people think about them. It's basic human nature. Hitoshi is good at pretending he doesn't, but really, he cares even more than most. He thinks things will be better if he becomes a hero, that people will finally give him the fair chance he deserves. He does everything he can to prove people wrong about him, but it never – I've been watching it happen for over a decade. Everything begins and *ends* with quirks. When Hitoshi was three, he was just another kid. When he was four, he was a *brainwasher*. Even his mother–

"As soon as people know, that's all he is to them. People don't like the idea of Brainwashing. They especially dislike the idea of a *hero* with Brainwashing. And people are incredibly cruel."

"So what?" Shouta asks, a touch harsher than he intends. "You want him to pretend he doesn't have a quirk at all? Cower beneath that cruelty instead of rising above it?"

“If that would keep him safe and happy, then yes.”

“Would it?”

“Safe, maybe,” Dr. Shinsou admits, “but not happy.”

In the kitchen, a buzzer rings, shrill and harsh. Dr. Shinsou inhales and exhales, precise and measured. He stands, brushing his hands against his trousers, and offers Shouta a small smile, weak but not wholly fake.

“Sorry,” he says, “I have a cake in the oven. I’ll just be a minute.” Sure enough, a minute later he leans back against the living room wall and pins Shouta with a heavy stare. “He should be home any minute now,” Dr. Shinsou says, holding up his phone.

“Are you going to try to prevent his transfer?” Shouta asks bluntly. In that case, it would be best for Shouta to leave now. If Dr. Shinsou doesn’t approve a transfer, then there’s nothing Shouta can actually do about it. It would be cruel to make the kid an offer if it’s going to end up being an empty one.

“I love my son,” Dr. Shinsou replies after a silence that lingers just a second too long for Shouta’s liking. “I’m incredibly proud of him. I think he could be amazing, if the world would let him be.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Dr. Shinsou shakes his head, weary. “No, Aizawa. I’m not going to stop him. But I’ll be expecting you to help me keep him *safe*. Not just from the villains.”

“Of course,” Shouta agrees without hesitation. “That’s my job.”

“Well, you’ll have your work cut out for you.”

With perfect timing, the front door opens, banging loudly against the wall. Fervently, Shouta hopes that the second half of the conversation is easier than the first.

The next time Hitoshi checks his phone, he sees what fills every teenager with dread.

2 missed calls --- Dad --- 11:31 AM

Dad --- 11:32 AM

Is your phone silenced again? You know you're not supposed to silence your phone when you leave the house.

Hurry home when you get this

Don't worry, nothing's wrong. We have a guest – I think you'll like them :-)

Hitoshi --- 11:49 AM

omw

pls stop putting noses on your smilies

its weird

Thankfully, by the time Hitoshi notices the messages, he's already halfway back to the apartment, so it takes him less than ten minutes to make the rest of the walk, even at his slower-than-average pace. The front door knocks into the wall as he opens it, knob banging into the small divot that's formed from doing the same thing a few too many times over the years. Hitoshi winces, closing the door much more gingerly than he opened it.

"I'm home!" he calls, teetering in the entry way as he tries to toe his shoes off without leaning down.

"Welcome home!" his father calls back. "We're in the living room!"

Equal parts curious and nervous about their unexpected company, Hitoshi peaks around the wall into the room before committing himself to entering. There is a man on the couch, though he looks more like a shadow than a man. Barring a thin, pale grey scarf that's looped endlessly around his neck, the man is dressed in all black, with matching hair, stubble, eyes, and eyebags. Besides the scarf and a ragged scar along one of his cheekbones, the man is remarkably unremarkable. The moment Hitoshi pokes his head past the wall, the man's eyes find him, and he rises from the couch. Standing, he's nearly a perfect middle ground of height between Hitoshi and Hitoshi's father.

"Hitoshi, this is Aizawa Shouta," Hitoshi's father introduces. "He's from UA."

“I’m the homeroom teacher of class 1-A,” Aizawa adds.

Holy shit, Hitoshi thinks.

“Holy shit,” Hitoshi says, words slipping out without his permission. “Am I – are you here for the reason I think you’re here for?” It sounds stupid, especially with the breathlessly surprised way Hitoshi says it, but he doesn’t want to assume, filled with a sudden, preemptive mortification at the thought of being mistaken.

Aizawa raises an eyebrow. “Why do you think I’m here?”

“Oh, uh–” Hitoshi falters, running a hand back and forth through the hair at the nape of his neck. “Well, I won the sports festival? So, yeah.” Aizawa stares at him, eyes flat and bored but intensely focused. Hitoshi forces himself to stand up straighter, rolling his shoulders back. “I beat the hero students, so I should be transferred to the hero course.”

Aizawa is silent for a moment, and Hitoshi is abruptly, absurdly *positive* that the man is actually here for a survey or something equally as innocuous, but he forces himself to stand his ground, matching Aizawa’s disinterested look with one of his own. Hitoshi beat the hero students. He should be transferred to the hero course. Both of those things are true, even if that’s somehow *not* why Aizawa is here.

“You will be,” Aizawa says after a dizzying pause, “if you put in the work. Sit down, there are conditions.”

“Conditions?” Hitoshi repeats as he takes a seat on the couch. Aizawa sits on the other side, and Hitoshi’s father makes a quick trip to the kitchen to grab a chair so the three of them don’t have to awkwardly cram together on the single piece of furniture.

“Your transfer is dependent on your success in a training program. We’ll need to get you up to snuff before you can officially join 1-A.”

“Up to snuff?” Hitoshi asks. He is conscious of the fact that he sounds a bit like an echo, repeating everything Aizawa says back to him, but Hitoshi is too indignant to worry about that for the moment. “I won the festival; I think that makes me ‘up to snuff.’”

“It doesn’t,” Aizawa counters mercilessly. “You don’t even know how to throw a punch.”

Hitoshi bristles. “I got the job done!”

“Do you have any physical training?”

“I have a mental quirk.”

“All the more reason to have *physical* training. I’ll take that as a no.”

“Aizawa,” Hitoshi’s father begins, a hint of warning in his tone that Hitoshi simultaneously appreciates and resents. Aizawa waves him off.

“Look, I’m just telling you how it is. Your quirk has potential but relying on it exclusively will get you nowhere. In a training setting, especially, it will be useless to you more often than not. Your future classmates will learn your tactics sooner rather than later, and if you have no physical training to fall back on, you’ll be putting yourself and your peers in unnecessary danger. Most of 1-A have physical quirks, and at this point in the year, they all have weeks of foundational heroics training that you’re lacking.”

Glaring at the floor, Hitoshi grits his teeth. It’s the same rhetoric he’s been hearing for years. Mental quirks are inferior to physical quirks. His own quirk is so easily countered that it may as well be useless. Even after winning, even after definitively *proving* that he can hold his own against the hero brats, he still has to jump through hoops to stand toe-to-toe with them.

“Shinsou,” Aizawa says sharply. Hitoshi shifts his glare from the floor to the man. “I’m not saying you are any less capable than they are. I’m saying that, as long as you apply yourself to training, you *will* transfer to and graduate with 1-A, but you will do so in the way that best ensures your success and safety. Understand? I’m not here to baby your ego.” Grudgingly, Hitoshi nods.

“Alright then. If you agree to what principal Nedzu and I have arranged, your training will begin on Monday. After classes, four days a week, you’ll be with me and another student. Lessons will be rigorous but flexible, depending on what you want to learn and what you need to know. Together, we’ll develop a diet and exercise regimen that you’ll be expected to follow. Two weeks from now, when hero students begin their internships, you’ll be doing a modified internship of your own with me. During final exams, your progress will be assessed. If everything goes well, you’ll be officially joining 1-A next semester. Any questions?”

“What about his regular studies?” Hitoshi’s father asks, while Hitoshi himself just blinks dumbly, turning the new information over in his head.

“He’ll be expected to keep his grades up, but if he starts struggling, we can provide additional academic support. Ideally,” Aizawa says to Hitoshi, “if you ever feel overwhelmed, you will *let me know*. You have potential. I want to help you reach it. But I’m not going to tell you that any part of this will be easy. Communication will be essential in solving problems before they can escalate.”

“This is a lot,” Hitoshi says.

“It is,” Aizawa agrees. “Can you handle it?”

And really, who ever knows what they can handle until they’re face-to-face with it in real life? It’s a question whose answer really only exists somewhere in the future. *Yes*, say the arrogant. *No*, say the insecure.

Hitoshi says, “Let’s find out.”

Aizawa grins at him, and it’s even more intimidating than the blank look from before. Hitoshi grins back.

Chapter End Notes

Stranger: Woah, are you that kid who won the sports festival?
Hitoshi, internal: Oh jesus, I’m not used to this kind of attention. Just play dumb.
Hitoshi: What sports festival?
Hitoshi, internal: Not thAT DUMB!

Dr. Shinsou: You have to pick your battles
Hitoshi, contrary, full of spite: *picks all the battles*
Dr. Shinsou: No – no, that’s too many. Put some back

Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part II
Update: Jun 17

Brainwashing - Part II

Chapter Notes

> How the HELL is this chapter over 8k? The answer is simple. There are two things that ALWAYS get out of control, even when I just want to write a nice little scene:
> 1) Kids being silly
> 2) Hitoshi's internal monolog

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With his head down and his arms held stiffly by his sides, Izuku trails after Eraser through the doors of class 1-A. The students, chattering to each other about the sports festival and the ensuing attention they've been receiving, fall quiet quickly, staring at Eraser with disciplined attention that is quickly stolen by Izuku's presence. He fights the urge to sink into Eraser's shadow as several people start talking, overlapping questions surging up from the class. Scowling, Eraser waves an arm for silence.

At the motion, Asui observes, "Your bandages are gone. I'm glad." Eraser's scowl persists, but some of the harsh irritation of it softens.

"Screw the bandages!" Kaminari interjects, leaning so far forward over his desk that he is practically on top of it. "Who's the kid?"

"Bro, that's Midoriya," Kirishima says in a stage whisper. "He placed third in the festival."

"I know *that*. I mean – what's he doing here?"

"He's joining the class, obviously. You saw him, didn't you? He was super manly!"

"Shut up already!" Katsuki snaps from his own seat. Izuku stares resolutely at the desk in front of him – it's Shoji's, Shoji who *knows* and is watching Izuku silently.

"Right, Sensei?" Kirishima asks, ignoring Katsuki. Izuku's heart spasms at the title, but he swallows down the uncomfortable memories and focuses on the present. Eraser huffs an annoyed breath through his nose. In the corner of Izuku's vision, Eraser's hair rises, twisting through the air. His students stop speaking automatically, though several of them still look as if they are barely containing their

expectant excitement.

“This is Midoriya Izuku,” Eraser says flatly. “Starting today, he’ll be joining you for some of your classes.” Izuku takes the introduction as his cue, bowing deeply enough quickly enough that his eyes go slightly fuzzy for a split second. He blinks at the tile floor, the rush of blood in his ears mixing with the exclamations of the class like exuberant and anxiety-inducing static.

“Please take care of me!”

An abrupt hush falls over the room again as Izuku straightens up. Eraser stands behind him, quirk no doubt active once again to get the class to come to heel. In the front row, Aoyama waves to catch Izuku’s attention, winking when they make eye contact. Izuku manages a small, nervous smile in return.

“Control yourselves,” Eraser orders, unamused. “Midoriya, take a seat.”

It takes Izuku a fraction of a second too long to realize that he’s being spoken to, not immediately connecting the direction with the use of his surname. A slight clearing of Eraser’s throat, graciously not loud enough to catch the attention of anyone other than Izuku, makes Izuku startle slightly. He flushes, immediately lowering his head to hide it as he heads for the only two empty seats in the room. Both of them are behind Katsuki, and as Izuku passes, he can’t help but sneak an assessing look at his childhood friend turned victim. Katsuki pointedly doesn’t look back, staring unblinking at the blackboard. His hands rest on top of his desk, clenched into white-knuckled fists. For both their sakes, Izuku takes the seat closer to the back of the room, leaving an empty desk between them.

“I’m only going to say this once,” Eraser continues once Izuku is settled. “You can talk to Midoriya later, but if any of you bother or harass him, I *will* find out. So don’t do that.” He pauses for a moment and glares around the room, lingering on Katsuki for just a fraction of a second longer than most of the others. “Now, to business. We’re having a special lesson today – code names.” Several students cheer and are promptly silenced. “The other day I mentioned pro hero draft picks. The drafts begin in earnest in your second and third years, after you’ve gained enough experience to become immediate assets, but occasionally, heroes will show an interest in first-years that they think have potential.”

Eraser picks up a small remote from his desk, and with the press of a button, names and numbers are projected over the blackboard behind him. Unsurprisingly, at least to Izuku, Todoroki and Katsuki are at the top of the list, both having received thousands of offers. In contrast, third on the list, Iida, has only gotten a few hundred

“That’s such a big difference!” Kaminari groans, hanging his head back.

“In previous years, it’s been more spread out,” Eraser says.

“I didn’t get a single one,” Ashido pouts. Aoyama turns in his seat, patting one of her hands.

“Some people can’t recognize a good thing when they see one,” he says, comforting and commiserating, his own name missing from the board as well.

“It doesn’t even make sense,” Jirou notes absently, twirling one of her jacks between her fingers. “Todoroki got eliminated in the second round. How’d he end up with more offers than Bakugou?” There’s a brief moment of silence as people turn to look at an impassive Todoroki. Jirou blinks, adding, “Uh, no offense Todoroki.”

“They’re probably all because of my dad,” Todoroki responds simply. He’s likely correct – name recognition is an incredibly powerful thing in the heroics industry – but the sentiment still makes Izuku frown.

“Bakugou probably scared everyone away,” Sero says, breaking the beginnings of an awkward silence. “The pros heard him screaming *‘DIE!’* at someone and decided they didn’t want him.”

“Huh?!” Katsuki barks, reaching across the aisle to swat at Sero. “Wanna repeat that, Tape Face? If the pros are fucking *scared,* I want nothing to do with them, anyway!”

“None for us,” a small voice says to Izuku’s left, pulling his attention away from the interactions around him.

“Dark Shadow,” he says, smiling slightly. “Hi.”

She is smaller than she was during the sports festival, head only slightly larger than a fist, tucked between Tokoyami and his desk instead of looming behind his shoulder. At the greeting she chirps – for lack of a better word, though like most noises she makes, it’s still rather jarring – and stretches towards Izuku, gripping onto the back of

his chair.

“H-hi, Tokoyami,” Izuku adds, forcing a smile through his nerves, unsure if the other boy has any desire to speak to him and not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

“Hello,” Tokoyami returns, nodding. “I’m pleased to see you achieved your transfer. Though it’s a shame you received no offers of your own, given your performance.”

“Oh, I, uh,” Izuku stutters. Technically speaking, he *had* gotten offers. Not nearly as many as Todoroki and Katsuki, but more than Iida. Agencies were always looking for powerful and well-controlled fire quirks – they’re the kind of strong, flashy abilities that the industry absolutely eats up. No doubt the mystery of Izuku’s enrollment status at UA had gathered him even more attention. Of course, those offers were ultimately meaningless, since Izuku couldn’t accept any of them.

“It’s my fault Fumi lost,” Dark Shadow informs Izuku matter-of-factly, apropos of nothing, sparing him from explaining his own situation.

“It was not,” Tokoyami corrects sharply. Dark Shadow blows a raspberry. “We lost *together*. If there is any fault to be had, it’s shared between us both.”

“At least the bad blonde boy got his nose broken,” Dark Shadow muses. “Did you see that?”

“I did,” Izuku confirms. When it happened, Izuku had cringed, but now, he smiles, if only because Dark Shadow seems so pleased about it.

“It was nice,” she says. “I don’t like that boy. I like you.”

“Dark Shadow,” Tokoyami scolds. The faint ruffling of the feathers along the back of his neck matches the resigned exasperation in his tone.

She ignores him, instead telling Izuku, “You’re odd.”

“Thank you?” Izuku replies.

“I apologize. Boundaries and social conventions are not Dark Shadow’s strong suit.”

Dark Shadow squawks, too loud for as near as she is to Izuku’s ear.

“Don’t apologize for me,” she protests, leaving the back of Izuku’s chair for the back of Tokoyami’s, tugging harshly on his feathers. “I’m right here and *I’m* not sorry.”

Behind Izuku, Yaoyorozu clears her throat. “Aizawa-Sensei! What about the students who didn’t receive any offers?”

“UA works with 40 agencies around the country to place our interns,” Eraser answers. “Everyone will be doing an internship. I’ll be passing out forms as soon as your code names have been approved. Those of you who have been drafted – keep in mind that your offers can be revoked. Pros often lose interest in students long before graduation, so don’t think you can get away with coasting by.”

In a smooth, nearly silent movement, the classroom door slides open. Midnight stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame. She pauses for a second, waiting until she has the attention of most of the class, before clicking her tongue and striding into the room.

“Always so harsh,” she teases. Eraser rolls his eyes. “I don’t know how you students put up with him.”

“Kayama will be making sure your names are okay. I can’t do stuff like that.”

“It’s true! He’s absolutely useless.” Eraser spares her a half-hearted glare, but quickly drops it, zipping himself into his sleeping bag and slouching to the floor. She continues, “Technically, the names you chose today will only be temporary, but they tend to stick, so there will be hell to pay if you don’t take this seriously. A hero’s image starts with their name. Think of who you want to become and pick a name that will help you on that journey.”

Whiteboards are passed down the rows. Katsuki throws the remainder of his stack on the desk behind him without bothering to look back. They clatter on the empty desk, out of Izuku’s easy reach. It’s not a big deal, really. Izuku doesn’t begrudge Katsuki the small act of pettiness, and Izuku can just get up and get them, but the thought of standing – moving, disrupting everyone’s concentration, calling attention to himself – sends an odd pang of anxiety through him. Just as he is about to force himself into motion, Sero sighs, making Izuku lock up again.

“Really Bakugou?” Sero asks. He reaches over and picks up the discarded whiteboards, stacking them back on top of each other. Then, he leans forward, knocking the boards into the back of Katsuki’s

head.

“I’ll fucking kill you!” Katsuki snaps immediately, spinning to face Sero. Sero leans back, stretching to hold the boards out to Izuku.

“Don’t worry about him,” Sero says with a laid-back smirk. “He’s just like that, it’s nothing personal.”

“T-thanks,” Izuku says as he accepts the whiteboards, smiling wryly at the irony of it all. Katsuki definitely is *like that*, but it’s also a lot more personal than Sero could probably understand.

“So you *want* to die, huh?” Katsuki growls, lunging at Sero’s desk. Sero’s chair scrapes across the floor as he pushes himself backwards. Katsuki, armed with a dry-erase marker, scribbles wildly over Sero’s blank whiteboard, then shoves it to the ground like a particularly spiteful cat.

Kirishima whistles. “Wow, Bakubro, you really showed him.”

“Yep,” Sero agrees, picking up his board and starting to scrub it clean. “I’m well and truly dead, now.”

“RIP,” Kaminari says, dragging a single finger beneath his eye, as if to wipe away tears. “Someone call 119.”

“Hello, police?” Ashido says, melodramatically mournful. “I’ve witnessed a murder.”

“Oh, fucking laugh it up. You won’t be fucking laughing when I shove your whiteboards down your throats, dumbass hero names and all.”

“No murder on school grounds,” Eraser interjects from his spot against the wall, eyes still closed. With his whiteboard secured and Katsuki petulantly glaring at his own, Izuku passes the extra one back to Yaoyorozu.

“Thank you,” she says, smiling kindly. “I’m Yaoyorozu Momo. I’m class 1-A’s representative, so if you have any questions or need any help, feel free to come to me any time. Welcome to the hero course, Midoriya.”

“Thanks. I, uh – nice to meet you. Call me Izuku,” Izuku says, half-impulsively. As much as he prefers to use his first name these days, it still feels disconcertingly inappropriate to make the request, for some reason. He adds, “I-If you’re comfortable with that, that is, I just – I

don't really, uh, u-use my surname much, but it's up to you. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," she replies, shaking her head. "It's nice to meet you as well, Izuku."

Izuku breathes a sigh of relief, turning back to his own desk. His whiteboard stares up at him, accusingly empty. The face of it is slightly stained and streaked from years of use, but it nonetheless seems glaringly, intimidatingly, blindingly white.

Around him, his new classmates are all focused on their task. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow have their heads pressed close together. Ashido's tongue is sticking out of the corner of her mouth. Various ideas are jotted down along the edges of Koda's board. Aoyama slams his board down on his desk, banging it up and down, just hard enough to make some noise, the face of it turned to Midnight.

"Alright," she says, amused, "let's start presenting our hero names. Who wants to go first? Maybe Hagakure?"

Aoyama, already out of his seat, spares a half second to look incredibly offended before he tosses his hair and flounces the rest of the short distance to the front and center of the classroom. Hagakure giggles, doodling a quick thumbs up on her board for Aoyama's benefit. He winks at her.

"I Can Not Stop Twinkling!" he announces grandiosely, holding his own board up for his mostly distracted audience. Kaminari and Ashido both choke quietly, turning to each other and leaning close to whisper together about the choice. Izuku winces slightly for Aoyama, but Aoyama himself either doesn't notice or isn't bothered.

Midnight nods thoughtfully. "I love the idea; it suits you perfectly. But it's a bit of a mouthful, isn't it?" Aoyama turns his board back towards himself.

"*Oui,*" he agrees after brief consideration. "It could perhaps be *un peu* shorter."

Midnight holds out a hand, and Aoyama deposits his marker into it, offering his whiteboard as well. She takes it and hands it back a moment later. Aoyama looks over her changes critically, then decisively turns his board back towards the classroom, raising it aloft again.

"I will be Twinkling!"

“Fabulous!” Ashido laughs, applauding as Aoyama takes a deep bow. She hops up from her seat as Aoyama takes his, replacing him at the front of the class. “My turn! I’m gonna be Alien Queen!” Compared to her mild, constructive response to Aoyama’s full sentence of a name, Midnight’s reaction now is visceral. She reels back slightly, nose scrunching up as she shakes her head. Personally, Izuku doesn’t see anything wrong with the name, but maybe Midnight just doesn’t like horror movies.

“Like that thing with the acid blood?” she questions, audibly shocked. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Try to think of something else.” Ashido looks from Midnight to the bold letters of her chosen hero name and back again. She frowns, squints.

“Do I have to?” she asks.

“Remember, these names could have a big effect on your future image. Do you really want to be associated with a horror movie monster?” Ashido thinks for another moment, then squares her jaw and tilts her chin back.

“Maybe I do! They’re cool and scary and strong. Besides, it’s not just about them, it’s about me! *I* wanna be Alien Queen. Because I look like this –” she gestures to herself, a chaotic waving motion that focuses mainly around her eyes and horns before sweeping grandly to encompass her whole body “– and I’m a queen, dang it!”

Kaminari cheers, “You tell her, Ashido!” Kirishima whoops. Midnight holds her hands up in surrender, her disgusted disapproval draining away.

“This is *your* name,” she says. “Your confidence is the most important thing. Aizawa, second opinion?”

“I’ve heard worse,” Eraser grunts.

“And that’s as good as a stamp of approval!”

From there, name presentations are much more tame. Asui calmly raises Froppy, a simple and sweet name she says she’s had picked out since childhood. Kirishima becomes Red Riot, Midnight and Izuku both instantly making the connection to Crimson Riot, which also helps to explain some of Kirishima’s fixation on “manliness.” Jirou, then Shoji, then Sero, all with excellent names ready to go. Izuku finds himself paying more attention to his classmates – the names they choose, the way they share them, the reactions of others – than the

still-blank whiteboard resting under his hands. So much as looking at it fills him with panic, his mind going as blank as the board's surface.

Hero names. Small Might, Mighty Boy, All Might Jr. When they played heroes, his mother would hide somewhere, and those were the names she would call out to for rescue. Izuku really had been a massive All Might fanboy, hadn't he? None of those names will work now, obviously. He isn't four years old anymore, admiring a hero that was more symbol than man, in a world where there was no villain All Might couldn't defeat, no person he couldn't save.

Now, Izuku is older, and he needs a name of his *own*. Except Izuku is more *human* than hero. There are villains he doesn't *want* to defeat. There are people he has *failed* to save. Sometimes, painfully, those two categories overlap. Who is Izuku meant to be, in the face of all that?

Hell, Izuku still doesn't know his own name. Midoriya Izuku or Shigaraki Izuku? Who are both of those people and who is he? How is he meant to build an identity that other people can rely on from such a weak foundation?

Izuku fiddles with the cap of his marker, lifting it up with his thumb and then pushing it back down until it clicks back into place. He considers asking Eraser what he's meant to do, but the man is dozing at the front of the room, and there's no way for Izuku to get his attention without getting everyone else's, as well. He stares intently, wondering if maybe there's a way for him to telepathically beam his distress into Eraser's head without a quirk, to no avail.

In a lull between presentations, it's Midnight that approaches his desk, the eyes of the class following her curiously as Izuku ducks his head down and wraps an arm around it. She leans down, and the longest layers of her hair spill over his desk in a curtain, providing an illusion of privacy.

"Shouta's bad habits are rubbing off on you already, aren't they?" she teases, speaking casually, the same way she has when they've run into each other in the teacher's lounge, when she has tried to insist that he call her Auntie Nemuri. "That's quite a death glare you've got there. What's on your mind, Izuku? Unless you're actually trying to kill Shouta with your eyes, in which case, have at it."

"What if I can't think of anything?" Izuku asks, as softly as he can manage.

"Ah, I see. That's not a problem. It's only your first day; it's fine if you

need to think about it. You'll need to think of something before internships start, but that's still two weeks away, so you've got time."

Izuku nods, relieved, but his face is still hot with embarrassment to have come into the lesson without an idea in the first place. Midnight ruffles his hair, returning to the front of the room, where Koda shyly steps forward to share his chosen name. Dark Shadow makes an odd trilling, whistling noise, darting towards Izuku. She slows once she gets close, approaching more cautiously, laying her talons almost gently on the lip of Izuku's desk.

"I can help," she says, staring at Izuku's blank whiteboard. "I helped Fumi. I'm good with names, you know. I like names."

"Oh yeah?" Izuku asks, amusement soothing the ache in his chest as she draws closer to his whiteboard, moving in small increments, as if trying to escape his notice.

"Yes! You are very green, so your name should have something to do with that. Or maybe dragons. They breathe fire, like you, and they're also green, because they're actually just really big lizards. Did you know that?"

"Not all lizards are green," Tokoyami says. Dark Shadow shoots him a nasty look, briefly distracted from her quest to sneak Izuku's marker out of his hand.

"Izuku would be a green lizard," she asserts. The degree of disdain she manages to put into the words is almost admirable.

"Of course," Tokoyami soothes. "How could I have been so foolish? My apologies."

"He's teasing me," Dark Shadow informs Izuku, pulling the cap off her pilfered marker with her beak. "But that's fine. If he thinks you'd be a different color, then he's a *bird brain*."

Affronted, Tokoyami squawks, the most bird-like noise Izuku has ever heard him make, and he seems slightly flustered by that fact afterwards, feathers ruffled. Dark Shadow, snickering, proceeds to fill Izuku's whiteboard with clumsy doodles that he's pretty sure are meant to be dragons. He gives each one the praise it deserves, even if they do nothing to inspire him by way of name ideas.

In front of him, separated by a single desk, Katsuki hunches, rigid as stone, over his own whiteboard. With class drawing to a close, it's

curious that he hasn't announced his name yet.

King Explosion Murder, he had proclaimed, loudly and proudly, when he was only four years old. Aunt Mitsuki had sighed, shook her head, said she had no idea where he learned to say things like that, but she's given up stopping him. Izuku doubts Katsuki has changed his mind since then. Very little about Katsuki has changed, really. He's always been an unstoppable force in that sense, mercilessly carving his way down whatever path he decided to walk.

When King Explosion Murder walks the streets, the world won't know what's hit it.

King Explosion Murder, Katsuki writes, less than five minutes into the lesson. That's his perfect hero name; it always has been. Always, Katsuki has *always* known exactly who he is going to be.

His quirk had come in not long after his fourth birthday, the first in his class and he bragged about it accordingly. Standing in front of an adoring audience of preschoolers, popping little orange sparks across his palms, he announced, "I've got the best quirk! The doctor and my parents all said it's really strong, which means I'm gonna be the number one hero!"

"Wow!" said one of the extras "That's so cool Bakugou!"

"I wish I had a quirk like that! I better get mine soon!"

"Let's play heroes and villains!"

"Yeah, yeah! Bakugou, what's your hero name?"

He didn't even need to think. "King Explosion Murder," he said, loudly and proudly. His classmates' reactions were varied. Some of them cheered appropriately, others giggled or scrunched up their noses, but Katsuki hadn't minded them.

He had been looking at Deku – though at this point, Deku wasn't Deku yet. He was Izuku, sometimes even Zuchan, and he had been Katsuki's best friend in the entire world. Izuku had watched Katsuki show off with stars in his eyes. Hell, he had looked at Katsuki nearly as

reverently as he looked at All Might, and what a way to boost a four-year-old's ego. At *King Explosion Murder*, though, his smile turned down into a pensive frown.

"You can't call yourself that," Izuku had said. The extras had looked at him, amazed that he would reject something Katsuki said, while Katsuki himself crossed his arms and glared.

"Why not?" Katsuki asked.

"Because it's scary!"

"…Lord Explosion Murder?" Katsuki revised.

"No, Kacchan, that's still scary!" Perfectly content with the name he had thought up and out of ideas to satisfy whatever problem Izuku was having, Katsuki turned his nose up.

"Well, the villains should be scared! I'm gonna be the number one, which means I'm gonna catch all of 'em!"

"Catch them!" Izuku agreed, nodding vigorously. "*Not* murder them!" Then he shook his head, hair flopping about, as if to physically demonstrate – catch, yes; murder, no. As if Katsuki didn't already know that. He rolled his eyes.

"Whatever, nerd. I'd like to see you come up with a better name!"

For the next few days, Katsuki, much to the frustration of his parents and teachers, refused to answer to anything other than King Explosion Murder. That was his name, as far as he was concerned, and soon enough the entire world would know it, just like they knew All Might. Every time someone said it, Izuku would grimace or roll his eyes or stick out his tongue, which was annoying, but Katsuki was sure he would come around eventually. Then one day, Izuku came into class and immediately bee-lined for Katsuki, standing in front of him with his hands on his hips and his eyes shining triumphantly.

"I have something better!" he proclaimed, nearly shouting in his apparent determination, drawing the attention of all their classmates.

"Huh?"

"A better name! I found one."

"My name is already the best name!"

“It’s scary Kacchan!”

Katsuki turned his head away, “That’s not my name.”

“I’m not calling you the other thing. Besides, I have a *better* name,” Izuku insisted.

“Prove it.”

“Ground Zero,” Izuku said with a grin.

Katsuki blinked. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Kacchan! Bad word!”

“What the *heck* does that mean,” he corrected impatiently.

“It’s like–” Izuku made a vague gesture with his hands, frowning in consternation. “It’s like, when, when an explosion–”

“See,” Katsuki interrupted. “Even *you* don’t know what it means. It’s a bad name!”

“I know what it means! It’s, it’s – where an explosion comes from! But it’s also like, um, it’s like when a change happens? Like, where the change starts! That’s ground zero. And *you’re* Ground Zero because – because you explode and also, you’re gonna be the number one! It’s a better name!”

Katsuki thought for a moment, then shook his head. “It’s not as cool.”

And that had been that. Of course, Izuku hadn’t let the topic drop, relentlessly advocating for *Ground Zero*, but in less than a year, the two of them would no longer be speaking, and Katsuki had no reason to care about Deku’s opinion on his hero name.

Katsuki was always going to be King Explosion Murder. Strong. Undefeatable. *Victorious*. That’s all he has ever wanted to be.

And he *still* wants to be all of those things, except – except, murder. It’s just a word. A cool word. A scary word, but scary in a cool way. People would think twice before fucking with someone called King Explosion Murder, and that was the point, wasn’t it?

But it’s *not* just a word, really, is it? People *commit* murder; people *are* murdered. Pro heroes frequently end up one side of the binary or the other, if not both. Katsuki’s not naïve. He’s no soft touch who’s going

to get into this industry and cry about having to hurt people, but he's not – he's not a *monster.* He doesn't *want* to hurt people, not really.

He wants to be strong. Strong enough to hurt people, yes, strong enough to take down villains, but also strong enough to *protect* himself, to protect the world he lives in. That's what strength is *for*.

For the longest time, King Explosion Murder represented strength to Katsuki. All the things he wanted and needed to be. Now though, while his entire world has already been turned upside down, why not add another thing to the mix? Why not question more basic facts of his life? Maybe King Explosion Murder isn't the right kind of strength.

Ground zero.

The point where change begins.

Katsuki doesn't know what change will look like, but he thinks it's something he needs.

Less than five minutes into the lesson, Katsuki has already written *King Explosion Murder*. Less than a minute later, he erases it, wipes it away with a single motion. There are no remnants left behind.

Katsuki writes only the first character of *Ground Zero*, and then he is erasing that, too. History is not half so easy to wipe clean as a whiteboard, and there are eleven years of Katsuki insisting that he can't possibly use the name that fucking *Deku* gave him. He rests his forehead against his palm, glaring at the board, hypervigilantly aware of Deku's presence behind him.

Inevitably, Midnight drags him to the front of the room. Wordless but resentful, he presents his choice to the class.

"*Explosion?*" Shitty Hair reads, sounding doubtful.

"The name of your quirk?" Midnight asks in a similar tone. "Are you sure?"

"Is there a fucking problem with that?" Katsuki snaps.

"It's a little boring, isn't it?" Pikachu says. "I expected something more like – I don't know, Explosion God Death-Bringer or something." Tape Face and Raccoon Eyes both snort in laughter, and Pikachu grins in smug satisfaction while Katsuki glowers.

“It’s fine if that’s what you want,” Midnight says, though she doesn’t bother disguising her opinion on the matter, “but you might have some trouble standing out with a name like that.”

“I don’t need a damn name to help me stand out,” Katsuki says, stalking back to his desk.

Behind him, Deku looks all too fucking knowing. He probably thinks Katsuki is weak, pathetic. He’s planning something. The entire class is going to be caught up in whatever his shitty scheme is, all of them, caught directly at *ground* fucking *zero*. Katsuki is sure of it.

He’s sure of it, and simultaneously, sickeningly, unsure of how much he can trust his own goddamned thoughts.

Hitoshi is annoyed.

Now, one could claim that this is his default state, and they wouldn’t exactly be wrong, but even relatively speaking, today has been a hell of a day. Today, Hitoshi’s classmates were *nice* to him.

But Hitoshi, you might be thinking, that’s a *good thing,* right? Wrong. It’s terrible. Horrible. Hitoshi hates it.

For one thing, they’re only being nice because he won the sports festival. A couple of days ago, they didn’t give a shit about him one way or another. Generally speaking, they weren’t particularly cruel, unlike some of the people Hitoshi went to middle school with, but they usually didn’t engage with him at all beyond small, necessary interactions. Except now that he’s won the festival, the whole lot of them are taking an interest in him. People who derided Hitoshi’s quirk this time last week and praising it now, and it’s exactly that kind of turncoat opportunistic behavior that makes Hitoshi hate people.

Nothing has changed, not with Hitoshi himself, but only *now* is he worth something. Which, he’ll admit, is exactly the kind of recognition he had been craving, but he’s perfectly capable in reveling in finally proving himself while also being pissed that he had to prove himself at all.

If it was just their admiration, he could probably deal with that, but

admiration apparently comes with *conversation*. Everyone wants to *talk* to him and *congratulate* him and frankly, Hitoshi isn't really interested in talking to any of them, even if he puts his resentment at the abrupt change in their behavior aside. He doesn't like people much, and no, that's not just a defense mechanism. He also thinks they're legitimately confusing and stressful and too much work most of the time. He doesn't know how to talk to them, and he doesn't want to figure it out. Only now, they all want to talk to him – and goddamn it, Hitoshi wasn't actually prepared to live his fantasies of having his peers' approval.

It sucks, right? It's already a perfect recipe for a very long day and a very annoyed Hitoshi. His social battery is completely dry – if Hitoshi even has something as advanced as a *battery* powering his will to interact with people instead of, say, a very lazy hamster at a wheel.

But that's not even the end of it. The real kicker is a conversation that Hitoshi didn't even want to participate in, for the record, that went a little like this:

"Why haven't you been transferred to the hero course?" a classmate asked after lunch.

"I will be," Hitoshi responded, proud enough to share at least that bit of information. "I'm starting training today, and I'll transfer officially next semester."

"Oh. What about that other kid?"

"What other kid?"

"The one who came in third. All the 1-A kids were talking about him. Apparently, he joined them today."

There it is, the insult to add to the injury. Hitoshi couldn't believe it either, but *apparently* Midoriya – yeah, that's right, Midoriya, the guy who Hitoshi beat in the quarter-finals – is already in the hero course, while Hitoshi himself isn't *up to snuff* and needs to go through a rigorous training program before he can transfer. Life is just so fucking fair, isn't it.

On top of that, just one more thing, one last petty grievance to be the cherry on top of the shit sundae – UA has too many fucking gyms. There's at least five, not even counting the various training fields around campus, and they're all named after Greek alphabet bullshit. Aizawa – now Aizawa-Sensei, Hitoshi supposes – told Hitoshi which one they were meeting in, but look, Hitoshi has stuff going on, okay?

He's *stressed*, he can't be expected to remember that he's meant to go to gym… gamma? Or was it lambda? One of those two is from math class, Hitoshi is pretty sure, but he cannot fucking remember which for the life of him.

Already in his gym uniform, Hitoshi wanders around campus, trying not to look absolutely aimless as he struggles to remember where Gym Gamma even is. If that's even where he's meant to be going. He has Aizawa's number – the man gave it to both Hitoshi and his father before he left their house on Friday. Could Hitoshi text him? Would that make him look stupid? Would Aizawa be annoyed? He wouldn't have given Hitoshi the number if he didn't want Hitoshi to use it, right? After deliberating, probably for too long, and getting absolutely nowhere, Hitoshi steels himself, types out a message as quickly as he can and sends it, immediately locking his phone and shoving it away in his pocket, only for it to vibrate with an instantaneous reply.

Hitoshi --- 3:23 PM

Wheres the gym?

Aizawa --- 3:23 PM

eta 10min

Attached to the message is a map of campus, with a sloppy red circle drawn around one of the buildings in the back. Hitoshi squints at it. Even knowing *where* the gym is, he still can't figure out *which* gym it is, because he has no idea what the little curvy symbol is supposed to be. Fucking Greek, he guesses.

Using the map to orient himself, Hitoshi looks around for witnesses and then does a complete 180 as casually as he can manage. With proper direction, it only takes him a few minutes to reach Generic-Greek-Letter Gym, lights flickering on throughout the large, open room as he slips through the door and finds a place to set down his bag.

Exactly ten minutes after Aizawa's message, the man himself arrives, looking as exhausted as he did on Saturday. Hitoshi stands to greet him, stepping forward, but freezes in place when the *other student*, Hitoshi's new training partner, trails in.

"Shinsou," Aizawa says as Midoriya – yeah, that's right, fucking *Midoriya* – drops their things by the wall near the entrance. "You found the place. Good. The campus is a rat maze, I swear." There is no

inflection in Aizawa's voice to indicate that he's joking, but Midoriya huffs a small laugh as the pair of them approach where Hitoshi is standing, still unmoving.

They stop a short distance away, turning towards each other in sync, Midoriya holding his hands up towards Aizawa. His sleeves droop a couple of inches down his arms, revealing thin silver bands that Aizawa removes with a few fiddly movements. Midoriya rubs his wrists for a brief moment before hiding his hands behind his back, turning to face Hitoshi but not meeting his eyes.

"Introduce yourselves," Aizawa says gruffly as he tucks the bracelets away somewhere beneath his clothes.

"We've met," Hitoshi says. Aizawa raises his brows. Hitoshi returns the look with a blank stare.

"I'm Midoriya Izuku," Midoriya says, before a charged silence can fall. "Please call me Izuku."

"Shinsou Hitoshi." For good measure, he adds, "Call me Shinsou," just so Midoriya doesn't get any ideas. Midoriya smiles, a forced, uncomfortable thing, shifting his weight back and forth between his feet.

"Right," Aizawa drawls. "The two of you will be training together from here on out. Will that be a problem?"

"No, Eraser," Midoriya answers immediately. So he's a suck up, too. This just keeps getting worse.

"Why does he even need training if he's already been transferred?" Hitoshi asks. From the look Aizawa gives him, the question comes out more snide than Hitoshi had intended. Midoriya ducks his head, scuffing one obnoxiously red sneaker against the floor.

"That's none of your business," Aizawa deadpans after a tense moment of staring Hitoshi down. Hitoshi nods, averting his eyes as the back of his neck heats up. As resentful as he is towards Midoriya's presence, he wrangles in his bitterness, determined to not make a worse first impression than he already has.

"If this is going to be a problem," Aizawa continues, "tell me now."

Hitoshi looks Midoriya over critically. He's staring at the ground with a distant look in his eyes, hands still clasped behind his back in a

distinctly self-conscious gesture. Occasionally, he'll rock his weight and then fall still, as if deliberately stopping himself from fidgeting. Of course, there's more to him than meets the eye, Hitoshi is well aware.

Still, Hitoshi will take his opportunities where he can find them. He doesn't really have the luxury of choice, in that sense. Sometimes, you are lifted up with one hand and slapped in the face with the other, and if you're anything like Hitoshi, sometimes you don't have any choice but to take it. It's the best offer he's going to get.

"No, sir," he replies.

"Don't call me sir. It's Aizawa. Sensei, if you have to." He points at Midoriya, "That goes for you, too, Izuku." Hitoshi looks between them subtly, not letting his curiosity at the informality show on his face, but filing it away in his head all the same.

"Yes, Eraser," Midoriya says. Aizawa squints at him. Hitoshi feels distinctly like he has missed something.

"Problem child. Shinsou –" Hitoshi blinks at being addressed so abruptly "– we'll be starting with a quirk apprehension test. It will set a baseline for our future training and let me know if there's anything specific that we need to focus on. I'll know if you're slacking off. Do as well as you can. You can use your quirk however you see fit."

Not that his quirk will do him much good, Hitoshi thinks as Aizawa marks down the start and end points for a 50-meter dash. Hitoshi stands behind the starting line Aizawa has drawn on the floor with chalk. The man himself digs a stopwatch out of his scarf – Hitoshi doesn't know how that works, but it definitely seems like it came from inside the scarf. Midoriya, with a notebook in hand that he definitely didn't have a second before, lowers himself to the ground, sitting with his legs crossed.

"Is he just going to watch?" Hitoshi can't help but ask, disbelieving, when Midoriya flips through his book, scribbling something at the top of the page he settles on.

"Izuku's already done these exercises."

"When?" Hitoshi bites his tongue when Aizawa gives him a flatter-than-normal look. For once, Hitoshi sincerely isn't trying to cause problems – astonishing, he knows – but Midoriya had only just transferred into the hero course today. When the hell did he get a chance to take this quirk whatever test?

“I, um,” Midoriya speaks up. “I’ve been t-training with Eraser for around t-two weeks? I took the test when I st-started.”

Great, yet another way in which Midoriya has a head start. Hitoshi wonders how Midoriya had even caught Aizawa’s attention outside the festival if he wasn’t already in the hero course. Maybe it was some nepotism thing? That would explain at least half of the weird name business Midoriya and Aizawa have going on.

“Fine,” Hitoshi bites out.

He’s not sure if it would be better to do this alone or with someone else. Alone, he has to worry about the both of them watching him, judging him, but even if Midoriya was competing alongside him, Hitoshi was at risk of making an absolute fool of himself by underperforming. It’s a lose-lose situation. Losing even while he’s winning, the patented Shinsou Hitoshi special technique.

“Ready?” Aizawa asks as Hitoshi braces at the starting line.

So begins what very well may be the most embarrassing spectacle of Hitoshi’s life.

Thing is, he doesn’t even know if the embarrassment is warranted. He finishes the 50-meter dash on the longer end of six seconds, pathetically winded when his sneakers finally squeak to a stop. Is that fast? Slow? Is he panting too much? Holy shit, what if he’s not panting enough? Is that possible? He scored decently well in his middle school fitness assessments, usually in the upper middle of the pack, but this is an entirely different situation. Compared to hero kids using their quirks, he must be slow. Midoriya is fast, Hitoshi remembers. Definitely faster than Hitoshi.

Grip strength is next, and Hitoshi doubts that’s any better. It’s worse, probably. He may have shit stamina working against him when he’s running, but at least he has long legs – god bless growth spurts – to make for it. In the strength department he has nothing going for him unless we’re talking strength of will. Standing long jump? Now that’s decent. At least, Hitoshi thinks it’s decent. He’s probably wrong. But he’s *tall* and that must be giving him at least a sliver of an advantage. Repeated side steps? Don’t fucking talk to Hitoshi about repeated side steps. He nearly falls down, tripping over himself with less coordination than a newborn baby deer. Revenge of the long legs – sincerely, *fuck* growth spurts.

Hitoshi is mortified and he doesn’t even know if he should be. Which

makes him *frustrated*. He squeezes his hand rhythmically around the ball Aizawa gave him. This particular test, the ball throw, had been a major point of gossip the first couple days of school. According to cafeteria conversation, one girl had managed to launch her ball straight out of the *atmosphere*.

Obviously, Hitoshi can't do anything like that. Hell, they're *indoors*. Class 1-A's actual assessment had happened outside. It had *needed* to be outside, so the hero brats could go all out. Well, what if Hitoshi wanted to go all out? What if he wanted to throw this stupid little ball into outer space? So what if he's physically incapable of doing that? They're not even going to give him the *chance?* No, not Hitoshi. Hitoshi they stick in a room with a ceiling and four walls. Granted, it's a big ass room, big enough that Hitoshi doubts he can actually toss the ball across its entire length, but they could have at least given him the benefit of the doubt.

Hitoshi has no idea how he's doing on the tests so far, but he's willing to place his bets on *not well*. Aizawa looks unimpressed, which may just be the default setting of his face, but Hitoshi can't help but think he looks especially uninspired. Midoriya is still sitting on the floor. Hitoshi is pretty sure he's taking fucking *notes*, and that's not disconcerting at all. What could he even be taking notes on?

Dear diary, Shinsou is really lame. He can't even throw a ball and his quirk is basically useless.

"Hey, Midoriya," Hitoshi says.

"Yeah?"

Midoriya's eyes go blank, because Hitoshi's quirk – as little as it may help him with things like running and jumping – *isn't* useless, no matter what Midoriya's imaginary diary says. Hitoshi glances from Midoriya, slack faced on the floor, to Aizawa, trying to gauge the man's reaction. He looks as unimpressed as ever, but at least he doesn't seem angry, which is what Hitoshi was afraid of.

"Come here," Hitoshi orders, keeping his eyes on Aizawa just in case.

Midoriya stands and walks over to him. Gently, Hitoshi repositions Midoriya to take his spot, stepping to the side. He places the ball in Midoriya's hand, closing his fingers around it. Lax and malleable, Midoriya puts up no resistance, allowing Hitoshi to manipulate him as he sees fit. From what Hitoshi remembers, Midoriya is freakishly strong. Hitoshi is still pretty sure that Midoriya *picked him up* during

the obstacle course and *threw him* to the nearest platform, even if Hitoshi isn't entirely sure how someone who's half a foot shorter than him and not particularly bulky could manage such a thing. Regardless, chances are good that Midoriya is, at the very least, stronger than Hitoshi.

"Throw that ball as hard as you can," Hitoshi commands, taking a few steps back.

Instantly, Midoriya moves, refining his stance from the placid way he was standing to something anchored and powerful. Aizawa grabs Hitoshi by the elbow, pulling him another few steps away as Midoriya twists, winding his arm back. He uncoils like a spring, and Hitoshi can only admire the impeccable control of his form for a moment before a cacophony of noise has him instinctually dropping to the ground, head ducked down and hands over his ears.

"Ah, ow," Midoriya says a second later, free from Hitoshi's control. "That's going to be sore in the morning." He braces one hand on his shoulder, rotating the joint, wincing slightly as he extends his arm.

"And *that's* why these tests are usually done outside," Aizawa sighs. Carelessly, he gestures towards the far wall, a point high up near the ceiling. Hitoshi's eyes follow the movement without thought. It's easy to find the spot Aizawa is referring to, but much harder to connect that spot with the impact of Midoriya's throw. The brick, metal, and god knows what else of the gym is dented, cracked, dusted, *pulverized*. The ball didn't punch straight through the wall, but it looks like it was a close thing.

What the fuck? How the *hell?* That's just – it's not possible. Well, sure, it *is* possible, but not like this. There are plenty of people who are strong enough to crack metal and stone, but generally speaking, that's *all* those people can do. They can't *also* breathe fire and make it dance around them. What the hell kind of quirk does Midoriya have that gives him two distinct abilities that are both so powerful? Can this guy do *everything*? God, some people really do have all the luck.

"Alright, kid?" Aizawa asks as Midoriya stretches his shoulder and hisses.

"I'm alright!" Midoriya assures. "I might have strained something a little, but it's not too bad."

"Like how second-degree burns aren't too bad? We'll see what Recovery Girl has to say about it. Shinsou, are you alright?" Hitoshi,

realizing he is still crouched on the floor, awkwardly picks himself back up, taking a few deep breaths to calm the racing of his heart.

“I’m good,” he says. “Just wasn’t expecting, uh. That.”

Aizawa nods. “Good. In the future, you’ll want to specify that your commands should be followed without causing injury.”

“Oh shit. Sorry,” Hitoshi says to Midoriya. His voice is almost completely flat, probably because he’s still kind of reeling over the fact that Midoriya *did that*, but it has the unintentional consequence of making him sound like an asshole. Hitoshi doesn’t mind sounding like an asshole most of the time, but he prefers for it to be on purpose, at least.

Despite Hitoshi’s tone, Midoriya smiles, and it’s not like the expression he has been plastering over his face thus far. That look was the very distinct “I’m uncomfortable, don’t know how to navigate this situation, and also want to avoid conflict, so I’m just going to smile” smile. *This* smile is – well, it’s genuine, for one thing. Genuine, and excited, and Midoriya’s eyes are really big and really green and Hitoshi looks away just as the other boy starts talking.

“I’m alright!” Midoriya repeats. “You don’t need to apologize. It’s – it’s actually really interesting? Your q-quirk, I mean. Most people subconsciously limit themselves so they don’t get hurt, but if you can bypass the mind’s natural inhibitions, you could probably help people expand their limits even farther. Not to mention the psychological applications,” Midoriya adds, voice growing softer and words becoming faster as he trails away from Hitoshi to pick up his discarded notebook.

“Izuku,” Aizawa interjects, interrupting Midoriya in the middle of a half-incoherent sentence about internalized quirkism leading to repression and then quirk malfunction, which Hitoshi can only parse thanks to some of his father’s old research. “We still have a test to finish. You can harass Shinsou later.”

Midoriya blinks, then smiles sheepishly. “Right, sorry.”

Hitoshi, still confounded by the entire turn of events, finishes the last three tests in what he imagines is an incredibly mediocre manner. Actually, he’ll give himself some credit – he does pretty good at the toe touch. He might be a weak and gangly beanpole, but at least he’s a limber one. He has to take his wins where he can get them. When all is said and done, Midoriya hands Hitoshi a water bottle. Hitoshi takes

it with a mumbled thanks, downing half of it. Some spills over his chin because he notices too late that his hands are shaking slightly, and he grimaces at himself, wiping his sleeve over his face.

“Well,” Aizawa says, “we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Did I do that bad?” Hitoshi asks without thinking.

It’s Midoriya that answers, quickly assuring, “No, you didn’t do bad. C-considering you don’t have any training, your results were acceptable.” Midoriya’s smile, as tentatively friendly as it is, isn’t enough to save him from Hitoshi’s flat-eyed glare.

“Acceptable,” he parrots. “Great. Just what every guy wants to be.”

“It’s a starting place,” Aizawa says, rapping Hitoshi lightly on the top of the head before Hitoshi even realized that the man was close enough to do so. “Now we start pushing you from acceptable to exceptional. I told you it wouldn’t be easy.”

Hitoshi sighs. “I wouldn’t trust it if it was.”

Chapter End Notes

Mina: My name will be Alien Queen, because *I* am a queen!
Midnight: Fair enough, have a nice day.

Kirishima: Hey, where’s Sero?
Kaminari: Oh no… you didn’t hear?
Mina: Kiri… Sero was in an accident.
Sero: Guys come on, this was supposed to be a joke on Bakugou. Stop telling people I’m dead!
Kaminari: Sometimes, I can still hear his voice…

Hitoshi: Midoriya got transferred to the hero course and I *will* hold this against him.
Izuku: *smiles*
Hitoshi: Oh no,,,,,, he’s pretty

Next Chapter: Brainwashing – Part III
Update: Jun 24

Brainwashing - Part III

Chapter Notes

Scenes written in Brainwashing: 9
Scenes cut from Brainwashing: 6
May they all rest in pieces on the cutting room floor.

Flynn: X
Surya: X
Ume: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tomura traces a finger along his neck, dragging his nail against his skin. He leans casually against the bar, head propped up in his hand, one heel resting on the opposite knee. The whole set up feels off, incomplete. He slots a hand over his face, fitting it into the familiar position that Father would occupy if that damned traitor hadn't gone and lost him. It's not the same. He sneers, tearing his hand away from his face to tap an impatient rhythm on the bar top, aggressively enough that his nails form little half-moon dents in the wax. Kurogiri will hate that, Tomura thinks, intentionally gouging his fingers deeper into the surface.

Stain, the Hero Killer, falls into the bar silently. He lands crouched, surprisingly graceful considering how disorienting Kurogiri's warp gates can be. Blood shot eyes zero in on Tomura in the span of a breath, as Stain coils up to lunge. He launches himself across the room in a smooth movement, deadly intent focused on Tomura with laser precision, the tattered ends of his bandages and scarf trailing behind him. Mid-leap, a portal opens to catch him, depositing him right back where he started as Kurogiri emerges behind the bar like a shadow blooming in the sinking sun. Stain pauses, but remains poised to spring into action, assessing the room with narrowed eyes, a vigilant hand on the hilt of one of his weapons.

"Would you like a drink?" Kurogiri offers politely, standing rigidly straight with his arms folded primly behind his back. He always takes hosting so seriously, even when the only guests they have in the bar are lawless vagabonds. Tomura rolls his eyes.

"No," Stain denies. "I would like to know what's going on."

“Hello, Hero Killer,” Tomura greets, poorly mimicking Kurogiri’s manners. “We’re the League of Villains, and we have an offer for you.”

“Not much of a League,” Stain says, looking between Tomura and Kurogiri. Tomura’s smile twitches, the peaks of his molars catching against each other as he grinds his teeth behind a bland smile.

“We’re currently recruiting,” Kurogiri replies, smoothly deflecting away from the recent decrease in their numbers.

“I see. You’re the ones behind the attack on UA. And you want to add me to your numbers.”

“Yeah,” Tomura confirms, with forced pleasantry that Sensei would be proud of. “You’ve got so much more experience as a villain, sir.” The flattery is sour on Tomura’s tongue, and the Hero Killer doesn’t even seem to take the bait, still exuding murderous intent.

“What are you after?”

Right to business, then. Well, Tomura won’t complain about the lack of small talk. He pulls a photo from his pocket, holding it up for Stain’s inspection, the man drawing slightly closer to get a better look. Tomura doesn’t bother to so much as glance at the image, himself. He already has it memorized. He can see it behind his eyelids whenever he blinks.

All Might, solemn but not cheerless, slips a medal over the head of a blank-faced traitor.

“I want to destroy everything I don’t like,” Tomura says, tapping a finger at the top of the photo. “These days, I hate these two most of all. I want to kill them both. The kid, first.”

“I was wrong to be interested,” Stain says, tone reflecting his sudden lack of investment in the situation. The edge of the picture crumples as Tomura’s grip on it twitches. “You’re the worst kind of person.”

“…Huh?” Tomura asks, daring Stain to continue.

Dismissively, the Hero Killer does. “What meaning is there in killing without conviction?”

“Meaning? The meaning is that I *want them dead*.”

“You’re a child throwing a tantrum.”

Tomura scoffs. “I can’t believe Sensei thought you were worth seeking out. Kurogiri,” he orders, “get this idiot out of my bar.”

“Shigaraki Tomura, perhaps you shouldn’t be so rash–”

Those brief moments of protest give Stain enough of an opening to move, landing on top of the bar in the blink of an eye, slashing his sword across Kurogiri’s bicep before the warp gate can divert or dodge the attack. Tomura hopes the rough tread of the Hero Killer’s shoes leaves scuffs on the bar’s surface. It would serve Kurogiri right – karma for being stupid enough to question orders. In the next instant, Stain’s sword is flashing towards where Tomura sits, but he vacates his stool, nimbly dancing out of the blade’s path.

“You could just leave,” Tomura sighs, gesturing lazily towards the door, clearly marked with a glowing red EXIT sign. Stain pulls out a dagger and attempts to drive it into Tomura’s side. Tomura kicks it out of his hand, sending it skidding across the floor to clatter to a stop underneath one of the booths.

“People like you are part of the problem,” the Hero Killer says, tongue lulling obscenely from his mouth, another blade already appearing in the hand Tomura just disarmed. “It’s better to eradicate you now, while I’m here.”

“Eradicate?” Tomura repeats incredulously. “How pretentious. I think I’ll just kill you, instead. Kurogiri, why is this guy still here?”

“Your babysitter can’t help you now.”

“I-I can’t move my body…” Kurogiri admits, voice strained where he slumps against the shelves behind him. Tomura ducks under another wide sweep of Stain’s sword. “It must be the Hero Killer’s quirk.” The sleeve of Kurogiri’s dress shirt is sliced neatly, blood spreading along the pristine fabric. The tear itself would probably be easy enough to mend, as clean as the edges are, but Tomura doubts that even Kurogiri will be able to get the stain out.

Tomura clicks his tongue, a testy, staccato noise belied by the singing of his blood in his veins. A gleeful energy tingles in his palms, a ravening desire to touch and take and tear apart, like Tomura hasn’t felt since the USJ. It’s fun, he thinks gleefully.

It’s fun until the exact moment it isn’t, until the moment when *Tomura* is the one who gets tripped up. Ultimately, it’s a stool that does it. Of course it fucking is. The pieces of shit are constantly getting in the

way but Kurogiri just replaces them whenever Tomura decays one or two or all of them. Stain kicks one into Tomura's path as he dodges backwards. Tomura's foot catches and twists around the leg of it.

The second he hits the floor, Stain leaps on top of him, face split by a grotesquely wide grin. He plants both his swords in the floor. One of them happens to go through Tomura's shoulder first. Between the adrenaline and the sharpness of the blade, there is a moment where Tomura barely feels it, where being pinned to the ground like a butterfly on display feels more of simple pressure than pain. Then Stain twists his grip on the hilt of his weapon, and Tomura's nerves catch fire.

"This is what happens to people without conviction," Stain says, too close to Tomura's face, breath hot and damp. "No matter what you want to accomplish, it's necessary to have conviction and desire. The weak and the weak-willed will be weeded out. It's only natural. That's why it turns out like this."

"Ow…" Tomura hisses as the sword through his shoulder shifts again. He laughs breathlessly a moment later, nearly soundless as he struggles to fill his lungs.

Stain ignores him entirely, continuing to rave, "Society is overgrown. Fake heroes, so strong in number that the word itself has lost all meaning. And criminals like you, who idly wave around their powers and call themselves villains." Stain pulls the sword *not* impaling Tomura from the floorboards, inching it closer to Tomura's throat. "You should all be purged."

Tomura grabs the blade before it can meet his neck, the honed edge cutting into his palm like warm butter. His grip immediately becomes slippery, blood dripping down the length of the sword to pool on the floor, seeping into the ends of Tomura's hair. He hates washing blood out of his hair. It takes forever, and he always ends up with faint pink patches when he gets impatient and fails to scrub everything away.

"You sure talk a lot," Tomura says. Beneath his fingers, metal cracks and becomes brittle. He smiles up at Stain's irritated face. "It's funny you say I'm the worst kind of person because I actually think *you're* the worst kind. A real hypocrite, you know? Conviction? That's stupid."

The bright silver of Stain's sword dulls to a mottled mix of grey-brown-red. With a single squeeze of Tomura's hand, the entire thing

breaks apart into small, abrasive pieces of grit that rain down over Tomura's neck and jaw. It clumps up around his palm, clogging the wound there shut while causing an intense stinging itch along the edges. Tomura ignores it.

"I don't have anything grand like that," he continues. "I just do what I want to do. So do you – you just dress it up in fancy words. You want to kill 'fake heroes?' Well, I want to kill traitors and false symbols. What's the difference, really?"

Stain still crouches over Tomura, who takes advantage of their proximity, lashing out with his injured hand. The Hero Killer manages to escape by a hair's breadth, retreating to the other side of the room while Tomura quickly disposes of the sword nailing him to the ground so he can stand. His shoulder aches fiercely, his shirt hot and tacky against his skin. He probes the edges of the wound, hissing at the tenderness.

"We don't have a healer in the party anymore, you know," he gripes, sending a nasty look towards Stain, who straightens up, watching from a wary distance. "Will you take responsibility for this?"

"So that's who you are," Stain says, a complete non-answer.

"What are you talking about now?"

"It seems our primary goals directly oppose each other. But…" Tomura's jaw twitches as Stain trails off. All talk and no substance. Tomura is going to need at least some stitches and a tetanus shot after that stunt with the swords, but Stain is already absorbed with his conceited sermonizing. Why had Sensei ever given this guy a second glance?

"I don't care," Tomura says bluntly, curling his lip. "Go home. Die. You're annoying me."

"Shigaraki Tomura," Kurogiri interjects, shifting at the side. Apparently, now that Tomura has no use for him, he's no longer paralyzed. "He could be a great asset."

"I was testing your true motives," Stain says.

"You hear that, Kurogiri? Testing me. I don't like that."

"People show their true colors when they're on the verge of death," Stain continues. "It's different, but there is a desire inside you – a

warped sprout of conviction. How will you bud?"

"Fuck conviction."

"Of course, I can always dispose of you later, if I don't like what you grow into." Stain hums, unimpressed. Tomura returns the sentiment, but he sees no reason to be so fucking *wordy* about it.

"Dispose of me?" For someone named the Hero *Killer,* Stain seems ridiculously unwilling to put things plainly and just call killing what it is. "Kurogiri, I don't want this lunatic as a party member. Get rid of him."

"My business is done," Stain agrees, which makes Tomura want to immediately retract the order. "Now, return me to Hosu. There are still things I must attend to there."

Obliging, Kurogiri opens a portal – though it's *Tomura's* commands he's following, *not* Stain's. As quickly as he arrived, the Hero Killer departs. Tomura once again seats himself at the bar, picking at the crust caked to his hand while Kurogiri takes a look around the disarray of the room and sighs.

"That went poorly," Kurogiri observes.

"We don't need him," Tomura dismisses. "I can deal with the traitor on my own."

"And All Might?"

"Yeah, sure, him too. Whatever. Traitor first, then we worry about All Might."

With another sigh, Kurogiri lets the conversation drop. He picks up a cloth and gets to work, starting by rubbing at a new scuff on the bar top.

Lunchtime is greeted enthusiastically by everyone except Izuku, who sinks down further in his seat as his desk immediately becomes the most desirable destination in the classroom. Ashido, Kaminari, Kirishima, Hagakure, and Iida surround him in an instant. Ashido takes the empty seat behind Katsuki, sitting backwards so she can rest

her elbows on Izuku's desk, the best positioning to immediately bombard him with questions.

"Mido! Can I call you Mido?" She doesn't wait for Izuku's answer, barreling on, "Where'd you disappear to yesterday? We were gonna invite you to eat with us, but you totally went *poof!*"

"Ashido!" Iida scolds, chopping a hand through the air. "Please give Midoriya his space!" As nice a gesture as his defense might be, it offers no actual relief, since Iida himself turns to Izuku just a second later. "Though she is correct. I was also going to offer you a place to sit at lunch, but Uraraka and I couldn't find you. Lunch is important for strengthening class bonds!"

"Maybe you can join us today," Kirishima offers, wearing a friendly smile that only serves to overstimulate Izuku more.

"He can't fucking eat with us!" Katsuki yells. That, at least, is familiar. Izuku could almost call it comforting, under the circumstances.

"Don't be a bitch, Bakugou," Kaminari taunts with a smug grin that is inflammatory rather than friendly. And that – the fact that anyone would so easily and intentionally fan the fire of Katsuki's anger, and that Katsuki would *allow* it at all – immediately unbalances Izuku again.

"Kaminari! Language!"

Aoyama insinuates himself smoothly into the group, shooing aside one of Ashido's elbows so he can perch himself on top of Izuku's desk, forcing Kaminari and Hagakure to back up a couple of steps as he stretches out his legs.

"Izuku will be eating with *moi*, obviously," he says, carelessly self-assured in a way that effortlessly draws attention to him, away from Izuku.

"You can't just steal him!" Ashido protests, jabbing an elbow into Aoyama's hip.

"Yeah," Kaminari agrees. "What gives you first dibs?"

"Well, as the most fabulous member of 1-A, it's only natural that Izuku will want to spend lunch with me. Like a moth to a flame, *non?*"

The small crowd surges in response, shouting over each other.

“Excuse me? Who died and made *you* the most fabulous? I’m right here!”

“Yeah, sorry Aoyama, but Ashido is a *queen*.”

“As vice president, it is my responsibility to ensure Midoriya’s integration into 1-A!”

“Wait, wouldn’t it make more sense for Midoriya to be the flame? ‘Cause he has a fire quirk and all.”

“Oh my god, you’re right. Bro, do you know what that means? *We’re the moths.*”

“Holy shit.”

Katsuki, always unmatched when it comes to volume, yells over the lot of them, “Sparkles can fucking have him!”

“Ah, your king has spoken.”

“He’s not our *king*! We don’t have to listen to Bakugou!”

“Yeah, fuck Bakugou!”

“Fuck *you*! Die!”

“Wait – if Bakugou is our king and Ashido is a queen, then–”

“*Don’t* finish that sentence.”

With the group thoroughly distracted, at least for the moment, Izuku contemplates slipping away. Penned in as he is though, it’s easier said than done. Not that Izuku really has anywhere to escape to. Yesterday, he had spent lunch in the teacher’s lounge, hiding from the overexuberance of his class with Eraser and Mic, but Eraser has already made it clear that he doesn’t want Izuku to make that a habit.

He knows he could spend the period fairly peacefully with Aoyama, Tokoyami, and Dark Shadow, all of whom are nice enough to spend time with Izuku with only minimal prying, but half the class will inevitably try to join them, driven by their curiosity about the new student in their midst. Aoyama is a blessing, gladly drawing attention away from Izuku, but he can only pull that off for so long. Besides, it’s not entirely fair of Izuku to ask Aoyama, Tokoyami, and Dark Shadow to abandon the groups they usually eat lunch with for his sake. As overwhelmed as he is now, he’s going to have to get used to it

eventually.

As occupied as they all are, no one turns towards the door when it slides open, but the booming “Young Midoriya!” that comes from the entrance grabs the attention of the entire class. All Might, larger than life, as always, stands in the threshold, and the group around Izuku parts slightly. Izuku sees his opportunity and grabs it, darting out of his seat, through the newly formed gap, and towards the exit of the classroom. He stops abruptly in front of All Might, who looks down at him with vague surprise. Izuku takes a couple of small, stuttering steps away, feeling his face go red.

“Yes, sir?” he asks after a brief pause.

“Lunch?” All Might offers, equally stilted, holding up a bento that looks comically small in his hands. When Izuku and the rest of 1-A stare at him silently, he adds, “I was hoping to talk to you about something.”

The explanation is vague enough to be both useless and ominous, but Izuku nods without much thought, eager to escape his new status as the center of attention. His classmates will talk about him when he’s gone, but their intrigue is already so high that Izuku doubts All Might’s intervention will actually do much to stoke the fire of their gossip. Better to be talked about than talked *to*, Izuku supposes, at least until he manages to get his feet back under him when it comes to interacting with his peers instead of just observing them.

All Might leads them away from the classroom, not saying a word as Izuku follows him. After the bustle of the classroom, the quiet is appreciated, soothing away some of the tension that has been building in Izuku, growing exponentially throughout the course of the day. Apprehension takes root in Izuku’s chest only after they reach a small, private meeting room, the door clicking closed behind them. All alone with All Might, Izuku shifts nervously from foot to foot and tries to rediscover the restful relief he had been feeling just a moment ago.

It escapes him, of course. Instead, Izuku finds himself compulsively cataloging the room – a long table, eight chairs, a projector, a blackboard, a small couch shoved into the corner, a bank of window on the far wall, the door which All Might did not lock and does not stand in the way of.

There’s also a small camera near the ceiling, the inobtrusive but still clearly noticeable kind. A red light blinks rhythmically to the side of

the lens. Then, that rhythm falters and Izuku knows that he is not so alone, after all. With his entry to the hero course, some of the restrictions on Izuku have been relaxed. He no longer has to be under the direct supervision of a hero at all times, but to say that he is ever left *un*supervised would still be grossly inaccurate, with Nedzu around.

The recording light blinks a new pattern.

. . _ _ . .

Is everything alright?

Izuku would be removed from the situation within minutes if he gave the slightest indication that he wanted to be. After only a second's hesitation, Izuku nods subtly, comforted by the simple knowledge that Nedzu is watching. It's not as if All Might has actually done anything to justify the rising tide of foreboding that's currently up to about Izuku's waist. It makes his stomach feel cold and heavy, but All Might himself hasn't made any move to intimidate or otherwise cow Izuku. In fact, as soon as they are alone, the hero is obscured by a burst of steam that clears away to reveal his smaller, emaciated form.

Truly, Izuku doesn't expect All Might to give him any problems, but he can't help but be uncomfortable. After all, the man – as much as he is worshipped almost as a god by most of the country – is only human. He has his own opinions, his own capacity for mistakes, for cruelty, and Izuku is all too aware of the negative leanings of their interactions so far. Their first meeting, on opposite sides of a battlefield. Their second, with Izuku in handcuffs and so incoherent that he can only remember fragments of what happened. Their third, when All Might pledged to save Shimura Tenko.

It was their fourth meeting that planted the seed for much of the uneasiness that Izuku feels now. Standing close together as All Might slipped a bronze medal over Izuku's neck, All Might had offered a solemn, but heartfelt, "Congratulations. You have the makings of an excellent hero." For the first time, the man had Izuku's full attention while Izuku's quirk was unsuppressed, and – Izuku hadn't enjoyed the sensation. The mysterious quirk that had saved hundreds of thousands of lives had felt like tar, like static, like barbed wire. Like a tangle of frayed threads. Familiar and alien all at once, dichotomous but universally nauseating. Izuku can't feel it now, but the hair along his arms stands on end, all the same, as he runs a finger along the smooth surface of the suppressing bands around his wrists.

“What did you n-need, sir?” Izuku asks when it becomes obvious that All Might will not be the one to speak first.

“Right. Yes,” All Might begins. “Well, my boy, getting straight to the point, you’ve gotten an offer from a hero.”

Izuku frowns. “An internship offer?” Izuku has gotten hundreds of offers and he has no idea who the vast majority of them are from. It’s not like it actually matters, since he can’t accept any of them.

“Yes. This one came in past the deadline, technically, but… The hero’s name is Gran Torino.”

“Gran Torino? Is he…” Izuku hesitates as he searches for the appropriate words. “About Recovery Girl’s height? With a similar, um, no-nonsense attitude?”

“A kind way of putting it.”

“He was – wasn’t he one of the heroes g-guarding me when I was…?” Izuku trails off, remembering the hazy days he spent in the safe house that feel like years ago.

All Might spares him from elaborating, replying, “Yes. Did you speak to him much?”

“No.” Izuku didn’t speak much at all, in that time. The only person he talked with at any length was Tsukauchi, and even those conversations were far from coherent. “Why?”

“As I said, he put in an internship offer for you,” All Might answers, turning away from Izuku to pace a short path back and forth across the room. “I’m trying to figure out why, myself. Gran Torino retired a long time ago, but in the days when he was active, he spent exactly a year teaching a UA. He was my homeroom teacher and a close friend of my mentor.”

“Shimura Nana,” Izuku remembers.

“Yes.”

“…What happened to her?” he asks quietly after a moment of indecisive deliberation. He suspects he already knows the answer. All Might looks at him silently, and Izuku can’t meet his eyes, suddenly sure that he shouldn’t have asked at all.

“She died when I was just a boy,” All Might eventually answers. Izuku swallows at the heaviness of his voice, the gravity of the words. “She fell in a battle against All for One.”

Izuku nods. He swallows again. This time it feels like swallowing a ball of needles. Perversely, the confirmation of Izuku’s suspicions feel like a boon. His father hurt so many people, and Izuku knew so few of their names. He knew faces and quirks and nothing more.

Shimura Nana is a name he can remember. A memory he can honor.

“May–” Izuku’s voice cracks, hoarse. He clears his throat and tries again, “Maybe that’s why. If he was f-friends with her and my f-father…”

“No,” All Might says. His tone shocks Izuku, surprisingly gentle, kind. Startled, Izuku looks up to see a matching look on the hero’s face. “He wouldn’t reach out to you for that reason alone. Gran Torino has never been the sort to judge one person for the actions of another. One of the many ways he’s a wiser man than me.”

Izuku looks away again, staring out the windows over the still campus. Reflexively, he fidgets with the bands around his wrists, running his nails between the metal and his skin.

“H-he was your teacher?” he asks.

All Might nods. “Officially, for a year. But he taught me far more than that.”

“Why not ask him, then?” All Might blanches, an almost laughable expression on such a large and powerful man. He shakes his head, legs visibly trembling as well, much to Izuku’s surprise.

“I couldn’t possibly,” All Might denies vehemently. “For him to use his old name for this… he must be planning something. Are you certain you have no ideas about why he’s taken an interest in you?”

Izuku fidgets, shrugging helplessly, “I’m s-sorry, sir. But I’ll be doing my internship with Eraserhead, so if he is, uh – pl-planning something, then it’s, um, it’s not going to work, at least?”

“Maybe,” All Might allows, though he sounds incredibly doubtful. “Or maybe he knows something that I don’t.” He shakes his head briskly. When he speaks again, his voice has regained its characteristic boom. This is All Might speaking, Izuku realizes. The man before – that was

Yagi. “Anyway – I’ve pulled you away from your friends for long enough. Thank you, young Midoriya, for entertaining the worries of an old man. If you hear anything else from Gran Torino, please let me know!”

With a shallow bow, All Might retreats, leaving Izuku alone in the room. He pulls a seat away from the table and throws himself into it, spinning around a few times. Coming to a stop, he glances back up to the camera.

“That was weird,” he tells it.

The light blinks back: – – – · · · – · – – · –

“Not helpful.”

Day two of Hitoshi’s training is nearly satisfying. Aizawa is a stern but surprisingly patient teacher, walking Hitoshi through physical movements, offering clear and concise solutions for problems as Hitoshi runs into them. Even when Hitoshi needs the same move demonstrated five times in a row, only to still mess it up when he makes his own attempt, Aizawa maintains his bored composure, never growing obviously frustrated.

Unlike Hitoshi himself, who can’t help but keep up a running internal monolog that grows increasingly vitriolic whenever he fails to grasp a basic concept. That’s all they do today, just the basics. How to throw a punch, simple offensive and defensive forms, how to block, dodge, roll, fall without busting himself up. But already, Hitoshi is struggling. Aizawa tells him – factually, not assuringly, and yet still assuring by virtue of how factual it is – that it’s normal to have difficulty. He says that it will get easier as Hitoshi grows more accustomed to using his body this way.

And despite Hitoshi’s mounting frustration, the session is still nearly satisfying. Nearly. The source of that caveat, the key obstacle, actually has nothing to do with Hitoshi’s performance. No, it’s *Midoriya’s* performance that tanks Hitoshi’s mood right into bleak, bitter territory.

Of course, wonder kid Midoriya is excellent at everything, first try.

Hitoshi tells himself that it's not a fair comparison. Midoriya obviously already knows what he's doing, while Hitoshi still has to learn it all. It does little to dull the sting of the fact that, somehow, Midoriya *already knows* what he's doing. He's not only learned it, he's perfected it. Sometimes, he chimes in from the sidelines with tips and tricks – and goddamn him, they're actually useful.

Somewhere in the middle of training, Hitoshi's inner voice helpfully informs him that Midoriya could destroy him, if he wanted to. And that's where shit really starts going downhill. It's a familiar sentiment. Hadn't Bakugou said something similar, before the awards ceremony? Bakugou had rambled on like a mad man, and among all the crazy bullshit, he had said *Deku should have fucking destroyed you*.

Midoriya catches Hitoshi's attempt at a punch and has the gall to tell him that his "form is good," but he's "projecting his intentions too obviously." Of course, Midoriya stutters his way through the words, but that doesn't make them any less infuriating. Hitoshi rips his fist away with a curt nod, diligently resetting his stance to match what Aizawa had shown him at the beginning. The next punch Hitoshi throws, Midoriya claims is "better," but he still effortlessly dodges past Hitoshi's fist.

Alright. Hitoshi can admit that Midoriya is leaps and bounds ahead of him, physically. But just because the guy can run fast, hit hard, and whatever else, doesn't mean he *should have destroyed* Hitoshi in their match. He can duck Hitoshi's punches as much as he likes – none of that matters when it's Hitoshi's *quirk* that Midoriya failed to dodge. Brainwashing can reduce even the physically strongest of people to nothing. Hitoshi has proven that.

Except – and Hitoshi hates that there's an *except*, but he can't stop himself from thinking it – Midoriya didn't fight back, did he? Hitoshi caught him, ordered him out of bounds, and Midoriya went. Hitoshi won. That was that. *Except* everyone always resists, even if it does them no good. Especially in the middle of a fight, struggling in Brainwashing's grip is basically an instinctual response.

And – and Hitoshi hates that there's an *and*, when the *except* is already bad enough – Midoriya hadn't exactly denied it.

Hitoshi tells himself he's just being paranoid. He probably is. Still, even if it's just paranoia, the creeping, itching feeling only gets worse as the session wears on. By the time Aizawa calls training to a stop, Hitoshi feels like he is going to crawl out of his skin, overanalyzing

Midoriya's every movement and coming up with nothing but more doubt. It wiggles in through his ears and chews away at his brain. Because Midoriya didn't fight back and Midoriya didn't deny it and there is no doubt at all that Midoriya *could* have destroyed Hitoshi and maybe all those things together means that Midoriya *should* have destroyed him.

Without choosing to, Hitoshi finds himself asking, "Did you let me win?"

The question probably makes him sound like an idiot. A needy, self-conscious one, at that. He struggles to keep his face blank while a flush rushes up the back of his neck, the heat of it leaking into his ears. God, way to beg for validation and show just how pathetic he is in the process. At least Midoriya is – well, Hitoshi doesn't like him, but he seems nice enough. Nicer than Hitoshi, at least. Hopefully he'll just say *no* and move on, not make a big deal of it, not hold it over Hitoshi's head, not give Hitoshi a reason to search for a hole in the floor big enough to swallow him.

Except – because there's always a fucking exception, isn't there, quickly working its way up Hitoshi's list of least favorite words – Midoriya still doesn't deny it. He trips over nothing, shoots a wordless look at Aizawa, wide-eyed and blank in a way that screams *frantic*. The blood rushes from Hitoshi's face fast enough to leave him dizzy.

"Oh, look at that," Aizawa says dryly. "I'm getting a phone call. I have to take this." There's not a single chime or beep or buzz. Aizawa doesn't even bother taking his phone out of his pocket, just turns and walks out of the building.

"Midoriya," Hitoshi prompts, voice slightly strained. He keeps a tight grip on the knot of anxiety in his chest, trying to keep himself from jumping to conclusions, but the longer Midoriya is silent, the more foregone those conclusions seem. Finally, Midoriya faces him, hands clenching spastically by his sides, eyes locked on Hitoshi's forehead. Once, then twice, he opens his mouth, only to close it, gaping like a fish out of water.

"I d-did," he admits on the third try, thin and thready as if the words are being forced through a physical barrier. "I th-thought I was trying to h-help you," he goes on to explain, "but really, I was just being s-s-self-fish. For what it's w-worth, I'm s-sorry. H-h-h – I h-hope we'll be a-able to be fr-friends."

Hitoshi blinks. “That’s not worth anything,” he says numbly.

It’s odd when paranoia is proven right. Afterall, paranoia is, by definition, irrational and unfounded. Which means Hitoshi was never actually being paranoid at all. He was being oblivious, and anything he mistakenly labeled “paranoia” was a niggling sense of *reality*. He suspected, he feared, but he wasn’t prepared to be *right*. Confirmation feels like slamming against a brick wall at a hundred miles an hour. Slowly, and then all at once, Hitoshi’s surprise gives way to anger. He straightens his spine, glaring down at Midoriya, whose eyes skirt from the lines of Hitoshi’s forehead to his shoulder.

“I’m not here to make *friends*,” Hitoshi spits, “and I don’t want your pity, either. You can take that and shove it up your ass.”

“It’s not p-pity–”

“Oh? What is it, then? *Charity?* Look at the pathetic gen ed kid, look how desperate he is. Let’s throw him a bone and then pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. Am I meant to say thank you?”

Midoriya frowns. “*No.* I already said–”

“Well forgive me for not giving a shit what you have to say!” Hitoshi interrupts, wringing a hand through the hair at the nape of his neck. “Do you have any idea how hard I worked to get here? And you’re telling me I *still* wasn’t good enough? This is fucking meaningless; I shouldn’t even be here–”

This time, it is Midoriya interrupting Hitoshi, “That’s not how it works.”

“Enlighten me then,” Hitoshi sneers. Midoriya tilts his chin back, eyes snapping to Hitoshi’s, vibrantly green, glaring just as fiercely as Hitoshi is. His hands are tightened into still fists by his sides, no longer fidgeting.

“I let you win,” Midoriya says, like a challenge rather than a confession, “but you beat Katsuki all on your own. Everyone who made it to the final event was *good enough*. Even some of the people who didn’t make it that far had the potential to win the entire thing. Bracket systems are *broken*. Who wins and loses depends entirely on who gets matched up against who. It’s all arbitrary. Rock, paper, scissors. Luck of the draw.”

“Sure,” Hitoshi scoffs, “talk to me about luck. That’s easy to say for

someone who's had enough of the good kind that they can go around passing up opportunities." Midoriya looks away again, glaring hard at the ground.

"I get that you're angry," Midoriya says. A caustic laugh crawls up Hitoshi's throat, acidic on the back of his tongue. "But you don't know anything about me."

"Really? Not anything? I know that you came out of nowhere and got handed everything I've ever wanted. I'm the one who won, but *you're* the one who gets immediately transferred to the hero course. I *beat you* and now you're *training me*. But wait – I guess I didn't really beat you after all, now did I? This is the first chance I've ever been given to be something other than the villain everyone seems to want me to be, and it's already built on a fucking lie. You have no idea what that's like." The words are like knives in Hitoshi's mouth. They taste like iron, metallic and sharp. Midoriya flinches back slightly. Then he goes completely, almost eerily, still.

"I don't know what that's like?" he echoes.

Midoriya's tone, suddenly quieter, close to a whisper, is simultaneously mournful and somehow threatening. Abruptly, Hitoshi remembers all the *other* things he knows about Midoriya, remembers exactly who he is dealing with. Midoriya's father is a villain. *Was* a villain. He's not anymore, not after Midoriya did whatever he did. And that knowledge alone is terrifying, has always been terrifying. Even Midoriya himself can be more than little bit scary sometimes, with his obvious competence and occasional intensity, but Hitoshi hasn't bothered to really, *really* consider the boy in front of him as someone who could potentially be dangerous.

"I came from nowhere?" Midoriya continues, louder, voice trembling. "I got handed a seat in the hero course? I'm not even technically enrolled in 1-A. I'm in a *rehabilitation program*. You've been called a villain? I've *been one*. You think *you're* living a lie? Get in line."

"It's not the same," Hitoshi counters, though his own voice shakes around the edges. He stands his ground but only barely, shifting his weight backwards. "You – you got a second chance. I've never even been given a first one."

Midoriya laughs, choked, "I haven't been *given* anything. Everything I have, I've *taken*." Tears build along the rims of his eyes, glittering beneath the harsh lights of the gym. He rubs them away, lips pulling

back in a frustrated grimace.

“Well, someone like you can get away with that.”

“Someone like me?”

“You have an amazing quirk.”

“My *quirk*?” Midoriya repeats, a baffled echo. Hitoshi takes a step back, mouth twisting uncomfortably. “God, Shinsou, do you even hear what you’re saying?”

Hitoshi opens his mouth to retort but Midoriya cuts him off, spitting to the side. A lick of flame shoots from his mouth, darting up and zigzagging chaotically through the air until it comes to rest, floating and flickering above Midoriya’s hand. As Hitoshi watches, stiff and on the defensive, the fingers of that same hand shift, elongating and darkening until the tips are solid black and wickedly sharp. Orange and yellow lights dance off the suddenly reflective surface of Midoriya’s skin, dazzling Hitoshi’s eyes. Blue filaments join the lightshow, bright, wavering lines stretching from Midoriya’s palm and between his fingers.

“Do you get it, yet?” Midoriya asks.

“What the–”

For a moment, Hitoshi loses himself. The white noise of his thoughts swarms into a thick, white fog that swallows him whole. He presses against it, and it presses back. It seeps through him, fills him up, surrounds him completely, until he doesn’t know where he stops and where it begins.

“Listen to me,” a voice says, and Hitoshi does. “Let this sink in. There’s more to people than quirks. And there’s more to quirks than meets the eye. You, of all people, should know that.”

And then Hitoshi belongs to himself again, though he can still hardly think. Sights and sensations filter back into his conscious mind, and he blinks blearily as he momentarily struggles to process them all. His eyes find Midoriya, standing across from Hitoshi, appearing disoriented in his own right as he stares at his hands. They are back to normal, now. Small and innocuous.

“What the hell?” Hitoshi asks weakly, finishing the question that had been so unceremoniously interrupted.

Midoriya looks from his hands to Hitoshi, eyes growing wide, then wider still. A tremor starts in the tips of his fingers, propagating through his frame until even the ends of his hair are quivering faintly. One of his hands covers his mouth, fingers digging divots into his cheeks. His breath hitches against his palm. Hitoshi takes a step backwards and glances to the door, wondering if the time has come to get Aizawa. Midoriya follows the retreat, reaching out, only to yank his hand back away again, like Hitoshi has burned him.

"I'm sorry!" Midoriya blurts, voice muffled against his hand.

"For what?" Hitoshi asks dumbly.

"For – for–" Hitoshi uses the response to snag Midoriya, to subdue the blossoming hysteria that Hitoshi can very clearly see and very much does *not* want to have to deal with. Midoriya continues, fragmented and frantic, but unaffected by Hitoshi's attempts to brainwash him, "I didn't m-mean to! I just – I'm s-stressed, and I g-got a-a-an- I got *m-mad,* and I–"

"Midoriya," Hitoshi interjects. The other boy falls silent with a tense whine. "What did you *do?*"

"Your *q-quirk*," Midoriya answers, tugging at his own hair, and Hitoshi still can't grab him. "I-I – I t-took it. I'm s-sorry, I didn't – I d-don't – *fuck!* – I sh-shouldn't have d-d-done that. Oh g-god." In a flash, Midoriya has moved forward, instantly in a surprised and confused Hitoshi's personal space, snatching up his wrist before he can backpedal away. Midoriya's fingers, clammy and pale, sneak up Hitoshi's sleeve. Midoriya stares intently at where they touch, mumbling, seemingly to himself, "I'll g-give it b-back. It's f-fine. I *k-knew* this was going to h-hap-pen. They n-never should h-have – god, I h-hope those o-ord-orders d-don't st-stick."

After a couple of long seconds, Midoriya drops Hitoshi's wrist, immediately backing away. As brief as the contact was, Hitoshi's skin prickles and twitches where Midoriya's fingers had dug in. Midoriya stares at him, bug-eyed and ashen. All Hitoshi can do is stare back, brows creasing together as he fails, for once, to find anything to say or ask. A tense moment later, Midoriya breaks the silence.

"You can r-report me," he says, coherent now, but clearly still more emotional than Hitoshi is prepared to deal with. "I – just tell Nedzu or E-Eraser and they'll – they'll take c-care of it."

With those parting words, Midoriya turns and runs out of the building,

leaving Hitoshi behind. He stares at the doors for a moment, waiting for someone to come and offer any kind of explanation. Waiting for Midoriya to barge back in, waiting for Aizawa to slump through the doors. Waiting for either of them to tell Hitoshi what the hell just happened.

No one comes.

Hitoshi is left standing alone, wondering what the hell he is even meant to be reporting. Obviously, *something* has happened. Something important. But Hitoshi doesn't know what or how. He doesn't know how they went from yelling at each other to Midoriya fleeing like a bat out of hell. He doesn't know what *I took it, I'll give it back* is meant to mean. None of it makes any sense. He closes a hand around his own wrist, squeezing until the dull ache of pressure replaces the phantom sensation of Midoriya's grip.

Chapter End Notes

> Catching me reorganizing the scene order of this part half a dozen times before just saying "fuck it," and leaving them wherever they ended up.
>
> Katsuki: Deku, you were a villain. This is UA.
> Izuku: So?
> Katsuki: So, that's against the rules and you can't sit with us.
>
> Nedzu: *watching all of UA's drama through the cameras*
> Nedzu: juicy :)
>
> Hitoshi: I am the only person who has ever had a hard time with anything! You have no idea what it's like!
> Izuku: That's it. I'm tired of being nice. Time to go apeshit.
>
> Next Chapter: Brainwashing – Part IV
> Update: Jul 1

Brainwashing - Part IV

Chapter Notes

Weird to be posting on a day other than Friday. Normally, if I don't get a chapter done in time, I just hold it back a week for consistency's sake, but I'll be out of town and unable to update next week, so here we are.

There was also supposed to be another scene in this part, but then the first two scenes were 7k and the third scene's outline was *4.5 pages* (usually they're less than 2). You know how people say that authors put pieces of themselves into all their characters? Well, all these characters have inherited my absolute inability to shut the fuck up. They talk and talk and *talk* and I am absolutely powerless to stop them. The second scene alone is longer than some previous parts.

Okay, now the Discord really provided this week! First of all, the art! From Dev, we have this! She played around with a few different versions, and I also really liked this one!
Gem drew this scene from ch16, and Eggs made this cute little Izuku! Thank you all!!!

We also have a ton of memes. Many of which are morse code related because I pissed off the Discord, whoops :)
Rhino: X X
Slushy: X X X X X X X X X
Snowy: X X X X X X X X X
Soft: X
Ume: X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, this whole guardianship business feels like counting the days between massive fuck ups, always hoping to set a new record and rarely succeeding. Izuku stumbles two steps out of the gym and looks side to side, glazed eyes scanning over his surroundings, probably too rapidly to really interpret any of what he is seeing. Shouta, seated on the ledge of a cracked-open window, hops down from his perch. He ignores the twinge that landing sends through his knee, approaching Izuku to grab him firmly by the upper arms. Immediately, the kid grasps back, reaching for Shouta's capture weapon with fumbling fingers.

“W-where are my c-cuffs?” he asks, tripping over the words as they spill off his tongue too quickly. “I’m sup-posed to – I n-need–”

Shouta moves his grip from Izuku’s bicep to his wrist, halting the uncoordinated movements of the kid’s hands while Shouta retrieves the bands from an internal pocket of his jumpsuit. With unnerving focus, Izuku watches Shouta’s progress, eyes intent on the glint of silver even after the bands are snapped into place and Izuku’s quirk is sealed away again. Then Izuku’s gaze, stricken and overwhelmed, shifts to meet Shouta’s. Shouta curses under his breath.

“How are you feeling?” he asks firmly, maintaining eye contact. It’s a stupid question when all the kid’s emotions are written in his eyes, none of them good, but it’s become nearly routine at this point. Izuku blinks, visibly anchoring himself.

“I’m feeling,” he responds. There is nothing comforting about the words, really, but Shouta finds himself relieved, nevertheless. Priority one – averting a complete breakdown – secured. Priority two – getting some damn privacy away from nosey passersby and the all-seeing eyes of the rat – still in progress. Hopefully Shinsou can handle the fallout of their confrontation alone because Izuku certainly can’t. Shouta hates to prioritize one student over another to this extreme, but when one of those students is *his kid* – his traumatized and mentally unstable kid, at that – the choice is easy to make, regardless of the sour taste it leaves in his mouth.

Keeping a grounding hand on Izuku’s shoulder, Shouta steers them back to the apartment. Izuku matches Shouta’s brisk pace without complaint, head down, bottom lip pinched between his teeth, hands tangled together. Occasionally, his breath hitches, but he is holding himself together remarkably well. Ironically, this only put Shouta more on edge. Shouta continues to guide Izuku through the apartment, leading him to the couch and pressing down on his shoulders until he sits mechanically. Bastard runs off to her closet, likely sensing the emotional tension, while Disco watches with curious caution from one of the stools by the counter. Unfortunately, Lucy, the best comfort animal on god’s green earth and Izuku’s undisputed favorite, is nowhere to be seen.

“Is that my dearest husband and greenbean I hear?” Hizashi sings from down the hall. The bathroom door is cracked open, a faint hiss of running water carrying through. Shouta looks from the narrow line of light spilling into the hallway to Izuku and back again.

“Stay here,” he orders. “I’ll be right back.”

With that, Shouta bolts to the bathroom. He wants – needs, if he’s being entirely honest – Hizashi’s support, which means Hizashi needs to be filled in on the situation. Filling Hizashi in requires leaving Izuku alone, and considering that the kid is probably catastrophizing, Shouta’s not sure it’s a worthwhile trade off, but chances are good he’ll make things worse if he tries to navigate the mire of Izuku’s emotions on his own.

In the bathroom, Hizashi stands in front of the running sink, a towel wrapped around his shoulders to protect his shirt as he runs wet fingers through his hair. He grins when Shouta joins him, but sobers quickly, moving to shut the water off. Shouta intercepts him, not wanting Izuku to overhear the conversation.

“What happened?” Hizashi asks, tangling their fingers together.

“I fucked up,” Shouta answers flatly.

“Is Izuku alright?”

“Physically, yes; mentally, probably not.”

“Are *you* alright?” Shouta gives Hizashi a look, but not an answer.

“Shinsou asked Izuku about their match,” he says instead, explaining as quickly and concisely as he can. “I left them alone to work it out. They argued. Izuku got angry at some of Shinsou’s assumptions, stole his quirk, used it against him, returned it, ran away, and is now freaking out. I *fucked up*, Zashi.”

Angel that he is, Hizashi takes only a second to process the information Shouta has unloaded on him, shutting the sink off with a decisive nod. He gives his dripping hair a perfunctory ruffle before dropping the towel carelessly to the ground and pushing Shouta out of the bathroom.

“Go get Lucy,” he instructs, heading straight to the living room. Izuku still sits on the couch, twisted around to peer at them over the back of it. Shouta grimaces internally at the fearful nerves on display in the kid’s eyes, heading for Izuku’s room to begin his search for the cat.

Luckily, Lucy is in the first place Shouta thinks to look, laying in a spot of evening sun that stretches across Izuku’s bed. Usually, Shouta is diligent about not startling Lucy. It’s not like the fluffball can hear

them coming, unlike the other demons. It's easy enough to walk into Lucy's sightline when he's awake or pat the space next to him when his eyes are closed. Now, though, Shouta scoops the cat up directly, ignoring the startled squeak and squirm his actions elicit in favor of hurrying back to the living room.

Izuku and Hizashi are both on the couch, now. They sit cross-legged, sideways, so they can face one another. Izuku's hands are balled up on top of his thighs and his eyes are directed at his ankles, though his stare is a thousand yards beyond them. Shouta reaches over the back of the couch and drops a disgruntled Lucy between the two. Izuku welcomes the cat into his lap, fists loosening as he reflexively runs his fingers through Lucy's fur, combing out loose strands and confetti. Shouta rounds the couch to sit on the coffee table, making the point of a triangle formation.

Looking between Shouta and Hizashi, Izuku takes a shaky breath and then hardens with determination. There is still a brittleness to his resolve, a brittleness to the whole of him, like he might break into pieces. It's a look Izuku wears less frequently every day, though still too often, and Shouta has never entirely figured out how to handle it. Thankfully, Hizashi is remarkably better. Shouta is certain that whatever conclusion the kid has drawn is backwards and flawed and overly self-recriminating, and sure enough, Izuku opens his mouth and proves Shouta right.

"I stole Shinsou's quirk," he confesses in a remarkably even voice, like he is laying his sins before god. His bottom lip trembles, but he purses his mouth to stop it and plows on, even as his words start to shake and stutter, "I – I told him to r-report me, but I didn't – I wanted to t-tell you mys-self." A careful breath. "He made me – no, I-I got angry, so I stole his quirk and I used it aga-against him. On – On purpose. I l-lashed out and I – I didn't even th-think, I just wanted him to *shut up*, so I f-forced him to. H-he was just u-upset, but I d-didn't even care–"

As Izuku speaks, he speeds up, words growing harder to understand. Hizashi reaches forward, laying a hand on Izuku's knee and squeezing. Izuku blinks, teeth clacking together as he bites off his ramble and clenches his jaw. He glares at Hizashi with red-rimmed eyes, tears sparkling along his waterline but not spilling over, an intensely baleful expression that looks out of place on the kid's face. None of the ire there is actually directed towards Hizashi, of course. It's all for Izuku, loathing of the self-variety. Shouta doesn't even want to imagine how bad the kid's internal state must be if that much of it is leaking out into the world. In Izuku's lap, Lucy meows quietly as Izuku's reflexive

petting grows a tad too rough. Izuku gentles immediately, some of the hard edges of his anger dulling into a weary regret.

“I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

Sighing, Shouta leans back on his hands, exchanging a look with Hizashi. Shouta’s temples throb, pulse thumping like a bass drum behind his eyes. He fights the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. Without a doubt, Izuku would take the gesture personally and do something ridiculous like internalize guilt over giving Shouta a headache, on top of everything else the kid is already beating himself up over.

“I don’t have a satisfactory answer to that question,” Shouta admits. “It’s complicated.” *Uncomplicate it*, Shouta would say, if he were on the other side of this conversation. Izuku, more patient and forgiving than Shouta deserves, only frowns slightly as he waits for elaboration. “It depends on what Shinsou does next,” is the best Shouta can offer.

“I told him he could report me. To y-you or Nedzu. And then–”

And then the incident would be reported to the committee, and they would meet to evaluate the severity of the incident and determine consequences. Given that Izuku was provoked and no one was harmed, surely Izuku would just be issued a warning. Except the committee had several members who had been staunchly against Izuku from the beginning, who could conceivably use even a small infraction to turn anyone with doubts about the program to their side. Shouta isn’t naïve enough to ignore that possibility, but it’s horrifying to confront, and he doesn’t want Izuku’s anxiety-prone mind to linger on it.

“We will deal with that if it happens,” Shouta says firmly.

“If?”

“You’re operating on the assumption that Shinsou is going to report you,” Hizashi points out gently.

“Why wouldn’t he?” Izuku asks, as if the mere possibility hadn’t so much as occurred to him. “I stole his quirk.”

“And you gave it back so quickly he didn’t even seem to realize what had happened,” Shouta adds. “You didn’t hurt him.” Izuku stares hard at Lucy for a moment, fingers scratching a fast, compulsive rhythm between the cat’s shoulder blades.

“That doesn’t matter!” he blurts, Lucy jumping as the hand in his fur abruptly flattens out. “I stole his quirk! That was – I shouldn’t have done that. He should report me. *I fucked up!* And I – I knew – this c-can’t–”

“Only Shinsou gets to decide what Shinsou should do,” Hizashi says as Izuku’s abandoned sentences trail off. “He might report you, and we’ll handle it if he does. But he might not even do that in the first place.”

“He’ll do it,” Izuku whispers with steadfast certainty. “He hates me.”

“Shinsou doesn’t hate you,” Shouta corrects firmly. “Shinsou doesn’t even *know* you.”

“…He acts like he hates me.”

Internally, Shouta winces. Today’s incident was Shinsou’s first real display of aggression towards Izuku, but he had been pointedly standoffish through both of their training sessions. Barring some discomfort and awkwardness, which seemed to give Izuku problems whenever he interacted with any of his peers, Izuku had weathered Shinsou’s attitude remarkably well. Shouta should have seen the escalation coming, and he should have realized that Izuku was more effected by it than he showed. Two more ways he handled the situation incorrectly, just great.

“He doesn’t know how else to act,” Shouta says. Vividly, he remembers his own beginnings at UA. He likes to think that he had never been quite as bad as Shinsou, but he had been saturated with his own kind of bitterness back then, and he had spent too long resenting the efforts of the people who tried to drag him out of that pit.

“And if he doesn’t report me?” Izuku asks, sounding lost. “It’s just – it’s like it never even happened?”

“No. It will always have happened. At the very least, Shinsou’s going to have questions, and at this point he deserves some of the answers. Actions always have consequences, we just… don’t know what they’ll be, yet.” It burns Shouta to admit, especially when Izuku hunches in on himself in response, folding around Lucy. Shouta swallows and continues, “I owe you an apology. I thought it would be best if the two of you worked out your issues on your own, and I hoped that you could help knock some sense into the kid. But I shouldn’t have left the two of you alone. So, I’m sorry.”

Izuku side-eyes him. “It’s not y-your fault. I’m the one who–”

“You were antagonized and responded accordingly. I’m the one who put you in that situation to begin with.”

He should have intervened as soon as Shinsou started blindly poking raw nerves. He shouldn’t have hoped that Izuku would be the one to make Shinsou see sense when that’s Shouta’s job. He never should have left them alone in the first place, just because he didn’t want to be dragged into their messy adolescent drama. This could have been avoided so easily, but Shouta dodged every reasonable course of action to embroil them in a situation that was too many varieties of complicated. A situation that Izuku would blame himself for, no matter the outcome.

Hizashi reaches out, grabs Shouta by the shoulder, and shakes him. “Knock it off,” he scolds. “We don’t need the both of you blaming yourselves. Here’s what we’ll do – I’ll talk to Shinsou tomorrow morning and, if you’re both comfortable with it, then we can try to have an actual mediated conversation after school. Yeah?”

From this angle, Shouta can’t see Izuku’s face, with his head hung and the mess of his hair in the way. Shouta can see the hitch of the kid’s shoulders though, and a second later he can hear the muffled sniffle that follows. Miraculously, Izuku had gotten through the conversation without crying, only to lose it now, as soon as they had seemingly found some kind of resolution. Shouta, who was finally beginning to relax, tenses up again.

“I just…” Izuku says, thick and wet, “I just want to k-know what’s going to ha-happen. Something h-has to… It can’t – It c-can’t be like th-this f-forever, it can’t l-last.”

“Oh kiddo,” Hizashi sighs, shuffling closer until he can comfortably wrap an arm around Izuku’s shoulders. “You’re right. Nothing lasts forever. But if we get our way, it’s only going to get better from here.”

Someday, hope for a better future won’t be a topic that makes Izuku sob. That’s Shouta’s own, private hope. For now, though, Izuku cries, and Hizashi wraps him up in his arms, and Lucy allows himself to be squished between them, and Shouta – Shouta will make himself useful and make some hot chocolate for when everyone calms down.

Izuku waits for the other shoe to drop, expecting it sharp and quick, like the fall of a guillotine blade. Things that seem too good to be true generally are and this… The last couple of weeks have been awful. Terrifying and overwhelming and exhausting. And so ridiculously, unbelievably *good*. Far better than Izuku deserves. Mic's unwavering compassion, Eraser's firm guidance, Nedzu's infectious curiosity, class 1-A's enthusiastic welcome. Izuku has known from the beginning that he doesn't have a right to any of this, and now he's gone and messed it up and everyone else will finally know, too.

Nothing good lasts forever. Especially not for people like Izuku, who tend to ruin every good thing they touch.

So, Izuku waits like a man with a noose around his neck, anticipating the moment that the chair keeping him up is kicked out from under him. Through the evening and the night, he waits for the phone to ring, waits for Eraser to get the call that will bring this whole charade to an end. When it doesn't come, he waits for the morning, and he walks into class A expecting to be seized and dragged away. Instead, he sits, tense, through homeroom and first period, and then he splits off from the rest of the class for his private lessons with Nedzu, where he waits for Nedzu to broach the issue. Maybe the principal's eyes sparkle more than usual, Izuku can't tell for sure, but the being says nothing on the subject, and dismisses Izuku like normal. Then Izuku waits for lunch, and, more specifically, he waits for Shinsou. With dread bubbling thick enough in his stomach that he doubts he'll be able to eat, and, unable to avoid the cafeteria, he walks through the doors and waits for Shinsou to show up and tear everything down. It would be an easy enough thing to do; Izuku's world seems to be made of paper mache, these days.

"Let's find somewhere to sit before the place fills up," Hagakure says, bouncing up on her toes as she scans the lunchroom for a table with enough seats. Izuku looks dubiously around the room. As large as it is, there's already a crowd of other students scattered throughout.

"Are we all going to fit?" Kaminari asks, echoing Izuku's unspoken doubt.

"The round tables seat, what, ten?" Ashido says as she joins Hagakure's search. "That way we can all talk!"

"There are thirteen of us."

“I’m great at Tetris!” Ashido exclaims, bopping a fist into her palm. “We can just put Bakugou in Kirishima’s lap and–”

“Oh, *fuck* no!” Katsuki interrupts. He pushes his way past the gaggle of his classmates, glaring at them all, but Ashido especially. “I’m not eating with you losers, at all. I’ll be in my usual spot, and the rest of you will stay far the hell away from me!” Katsuki’s eyes flicker to Izuku for just a moment, then he huffs, squares his jaw, and storms away without further word. Ashido rolls her eyes.

“Right, well, he just made my job easier, so good riddance! Now we only need two lap volunteers. Or four? We need two lap-ees and two lap-eers.”

“Um, actually Ashido,” Kirishima says, scratching behind his ear, “I should probably go with him.” With a sheepish smile, he turns to Izuku, “Sorry Mido! I just don’t want to leave him all alone, you know? Wouldn’t be very manly of me. We’ll definitely talk some other time, though!”

“I’ll go, too,” Sero says, with none of Kirishima’s guilty hesitance. “No offense guys, but it’s a little bit too crowded for me.” Izuku – who heartily agrees and would definitely do the same exact thing if not for the fact that the crowd would simply follow him – is not offended in the slightest. If anything, he’s jealous. Sero offers a lazy wave, and then walks away, ignoring Ashido and Kaminari’s boos and groans of complaint. Kirishima, following after Sero, turns to shrug at them, an apologetic gesture that seems to say *you do what you gotta do*.

“I guess no one has to sit in anyone’s lap, then,” Ashido says when she and Kaminari stop jeering. Izuku thinks she might sound a bit disappointed.

“It’s for the best,” Iida says. “It would be highly inappropriate, and as class representative–”

“*Deputy* representative,” Hagakure corrects, slinging an arm around Yaoyorozu’s shoulders. Yaoyorozu hunches over, pulled down by Hagakure’s shorter height, flustering for a moment before regaining her composure.

Iida continues as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “I can’t condone such behavior!”

“Not like it matters anymore. Now, we just need an empty table.” Ashido snaps her fingers, pointing to a nearby table with a lone

student at it. “Hey Tokoyami, think you could use Dark Shadow to scare that girl away?” Tokoyami looks to the indicated table, resettling his weight slightly. Given that Dark Shadow stopped manifesting as soon as class ended and the everyone started to gravitate towards Izuku, he is fairly sure she doesn’t like large groups, but she emerges now, small, fuzzy-edged head peaking out from Tokoyami’s collar as she hisses.

“We would prefer not to,” Tokoyami says neutrally.

Ashido pouts but doesn’t press. “Aw, alright. Spotted any good real estate, Hagakure?”

“Nope!”

“I, uh, I might see a spot,” Uraraka speaks up. “It’s at one of the long tables, but it looks like we’ll all fit!”

Ashido cheers. Izuku feels a little nauseous. As nerve wracking as it is, to just stand here at the entrance to the cafeteria as other students move around them, it was nice to have the group somewhat distracted by the question of where they were going to sit. Once they’re sitting down, all of their questions are going to be for Izuku.

“Are you alright, Midoriya?”

Izuku startles, nearly turning an ankle as he stumbles and looks to Asui. “Ah! Asui.”

She stares back at him with wide eyes, and from his time watching 1-A, Izuku knows that those eyes are incredibly observant, far more than one might expect. Asui’s face is hard to read, and that only makes her gaze more intense. She has a habit of devoting 110% of her attention to whatever she is looking at, a disconcerting amount of scrutiny to be subject to. She had looked at Izuku the same way at the USJ. He wonders what she had seen then, how it matches with what she sees now.

“Call me Tsu.”

He swallows and answers her question, “I’m, uh – I’m f-fine.”

“You look a little green, kero,” she says. Unconsciously, he hangs his head slightly, ruffling a hand through the curls that are growing out at the nape of his neck. It could be a joke about his coloring – he’s certainly heard that one before – but it’s just as likely that his ill

feeling has made its way to his face.

“I’m just – I’m a little t-tired, is all.”

“A lot has happened,” she agrees. “You’re uncomfortable around people, aren’t you?”

Izuku tenses, stammers half a noise, cuts himself off. It’s a harmless observation. He’d made a similar one about Dark Shadow just a moment ago. But the implications of his own discomfort immediately fill his head. He is uncomfortable with people because he hasn’t had much opportunity to be around them in the last five years. He is uncomfortable around these people in particular because they are hero hopefuls, the light of the future, and he is, at best, an ex-villain, the shadow of their past.

Asui – Tsu – tips her head. After a moment, she looks deliberately away and says, “Sorry. I tend to say whatever I’m thinking. I can be blunt.”

“It’s a-alright,” Izuku tells her honestly. There are far worse things she could have said to him, far worse thoughts she must be having. “You’re right. I, uh, I’m not – very g-good with people.”

Tsu hums and nods. They have reached the table that Uraraka spotted for them, and Izuku sits in the nearest seat, not allowing himself to linger on the decision, knowing that even such a small thing would make his anxiety ratchet up higher. Aoyama sits to his right, and as Ashido protests this arrangement, Tokoyami silently takes the seat to Izuku’s left. Tsu, though, stays standing behind Izuku, and as Uraraka passes her to pick a seat of her own, Tsu reaches out and taps her shoulder.

“What’s up, Tsu?” Uraraka asks.

“We should go sit somewhere else.”

Confused, Uraraka frowns. “Why? There’s enough room for all of us.”

“Midoriya is tired,” Tsu says simply. “We should leave him alone.” Uraraka makes a small, wordless exclamation. Izuku’s shoulders hunch up near his ears at the feeling of her eyes on him. He stares firmly at his hands, clasped together in his lap.

“Oh,” Uraraka says. Her disappointment is palpable, like sandpaper against Izuku’s skin. It softens a moment later. “If you say so. Come

on, Iida!”

“Huh?” Iida asks, already slinging a leg over a seat on the other side of the table. “As class representative, I should get to know our newest classmate, and lunch is the most efficient socialization time in the day.”

“Well, I actually had a question I was hoping to ask you about the math homework.”

“The math homework? Uraraka, that’s due today!”

“I know, that’s why it’s important,” Uraraka laughs, embarrassed. She presses her hands together in front of her chest. “Please, Iida!”

Iida frowns for a second, but then sighs and nods briskly. “I don’t approve of such negligent procrastination, but I’m always glad to offer assistance where I can!”

“Ah, thank you! You’re a life saver!” With a cheery smile and a wave, Uraraka grabs Iida by the elbow and pulls him away, Tsu following after.

Izuku relaxes fractionally. It was almost inevitable that lunch would be terribly overwhelming, but at least the crowd around him has reduced by half. Six people, as loud and intense as that number may be, is still a drastic improvement from twelve. Kaminari, Hagakure, and Yaoyorozu all sit across the table, while Ashido sits on Aoyama’s other side.

“Man,” she sighs, leaning forward and into Aoyama’s space to get closer to Izuku, “this isn’t nearly as fun, now.”

“Oh, but Ashido,” Hagakure says. Izuku can’t see her expression, obviously, but the tone of her voice and the way she brings one gloved hand over her mouth – or where Izuku imagines her mouth to be – conveys a coy slyness that instantly sets Izuku on edge. “Consider this: now we have him all to ourselves!”

“Excellent point!” Ashido exclaims while Izuku muffles a squeak behind his teeth.

“To yourselves?” Aoyama asks, bemused. “Are you forgetting about the rest of us?”

“Well, no,” Hagakure allows, “but you have to admit it will be a lot

easier to get all the hot goss this way."

"'Hot goss?'" Yaoyorozu repeats. Ashido and Hagakure both laugh at her perplexed expression, the careful way she enunciates the words. Izuku fidgets, clenching his hands tighter together. Aoyama reaches across the table to pat Yaoyorozu's arm with a sympathetic hum.

"The gossip," he informs her.

Ashido, still giggling, nods, "Yeah!"

"Oh." Yaoyorozu cuts her eyes towards Izuku, a small frown pulling at her mouth. "I don't know about that. It sounds a little…"

"We don't mean it in, like, a mean way or anything!" Ashido assures, speaking to both Yaoyorozu and Izuku while Hagakure vehemently agrees. "We're just curious, ya know? Come on, Yaoyorozu, you must be, too! Aren't you and Todoroki friends?" Yaoyorozu's eyes widen. She smooths small strands of her hair behind her ears, glancing off to the side.

"I don't know about friends, necessarily, but we're… acquaintances."

"I think that's as close to friends as Todoroki gets," Kaminari says dryly. A moment later, he yelps, glaring accusingly at Hagakure. "Your elbows are sharp! Watch where you're putting those things!"

"Whoops," she says unrepentantly. "Anyway, Midoriya, I heard that you managed to make Todoroki use his fire!"

"Um."

"He did! *C'est vrai.*"

"You *have* to tell us how you managed that!"

Izuku hesitates, unable to meet any of the expectant eyes that are staring at him. Even Yaoyorozu is waiting curiously, though she is not looking at him quite so blatantly as Ashido and Kaminari and presumably Hagakure, whose stare Izuku can feel, if not see. After a moment, he shakes his head and shrugs helplessly, words escaping him. Aoyama leans forward, resting his elbows against the table. He smiles, a small, private thing, like he is about to share confidential information.

"You should have seen it, it was truly *incroyable*," he says with easy

gravitas. “One moment he was in our arms – and the next! He was with team Todoroki, pursuing the points they had stolen from us. He stole Todoroki’s headband, hit him upside the head with a metal staff, and retreated, all before Todoroki could launch a proper defense. Todoroki must have gotten desperate, because that’s when he used the fire, trying to keep our team from reuniting, but of course, that did him little good against our fire bending Izuku.” He sends a wink Izuku’s way as he finishes, basking in the awed noises of Ashido and Hagakure.

“It was pretty amazing,” Yaoyorozu agrees, though she is frowning softly and rubbing the top of her shoulder.

Izuku grimaces. “Sorry,” he says, for the second time. Yaoyorozu, eyes briefly hazy with recollection, looks at him, hurrying to shake her head.

“No, no. You’re fine. You surprised me at the time, but you got the points fair and square. It didn’t hurt that much, honestly.”

“What did he do?” Hagakure asks eagerly. Yaoyorozu flushes and Izuku grimaces again, deeper this time.

“St-stood on her. And Uraraka. So I wouldn’t t-touch the ground.”

“Wait,” Ashido blurts. “Like Bakugou? I thought he was crazy for doing that!”

Izuku jumps as Kaminari slams a fist onto the table. “Bakugou!” he shouts. “What’s the deal with you two, anyway? Like, I’m not imaging it, right?” He turns to Ashido who nods in support. “There’s definitely something going on there!”

Izuku’s mouth goes dry. His tongue feels thick and stiff, and it sticks to the back of teeth that are suddenly locked in space. He forces himself to swallow, and the wet clicking noise of it fills his ears. Here they are, gossiping about Izuku’s confrontations with Todoroki, like that is the thing most worth talking about. They must know better. Were they beating around the bush out of kindness or reckless disregard? Do they realize what they are asking him now, by bringing up Katsuki? He swallows again.

“Bakugou has a problem with everyone,” Aoyama dismisses casually while Izuku is stuck like a dear in headlights.

Undeterred, Ashido insists, “Not like this! He calls him Deku! What’s

the deal with that? Is that your v– Ow!" Across from her, Kaminari widens his eyes conspicuously. "Fine, geeze," she mutters. "You didn't need to kick me."

They know, Izuku thinks, verging on hysterical. They all know. Of course they know. He already knew that they knew. It's good they know. Lambs shouldn't stay ignorant of wolves in their midst. These questions, this cheer. They are curious, but they're treating him like this because they are being *careful*. Careful with him, careful of him. Like he is porcelain, or maybe a time bomb. Izuku can't tell the difference. Can they?

"That's a very personal question," Yaoyorozu scolds after a silence that stretches a few seconds too long. "Maybe Asui had the right idea."

"What?" Ashido asks, voice rising in pitch as she approaches a whine. "I was just curious, since when is that a crime?"

Sternly, Yaoyorozu frowns, "It's a crime when you make your classmates uncomfortable, Ashido."

"A classroom crime," Kaminari agrees solemnly.

"Maybe we should go…"

"No," Ashido groans, three syllables longer than the single word should be. "We haven't gotten the chance to talk hardly at all!"

"It's only his third day," Hagakure points out, more subdued than before. "There'll be plenty of time to talk later on. When he's had some more time to, um, adjust, maybe."

"No, no, no. Look, I won't ask about Bakugou or any of the – other stuff, swear. Pinky promise! And let me tell you, my pinky promises are the super special unbreakable kind. I'm very trustworthy! That's fine, right Mido?"

"I–" Izuku says and gets no further. He can't think of anything else to say, much less force the words out of his mouth, out of his throat that closes down around them like a vice.

"That means scram," Dark Shadow says, suddenly popping up over the edge of the table, yellow eyes neon bright and menacing.

"You too, Tokoyami?" Ashido laments, resting her arms in front of her

and collapsing into them. “The entire table, plotting against me. Fine! Let’s go.” She springs back up, jumping out of her seat in the same movement. As Kaminari and Hagakure stand, Ashido takes a few steps away, but then she stops and turns back, rocking on her heels with her arms folded behind her. “I really am sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Midoriya. I’ll try to be better about it the next time we talk. Okay, bye!” Half-skipping, half-jogging, she goes off to a different table, and with soft apologies of their own, Kaminari and Hagakure both follow.

The only person remaining on the other side of the table, Yaoyorozu taps her hands on the tabletop. A second later, she nods resolutely to herself and stands.

“Sorry,” she says. “I know that we – 1-A – can be… a lot. They didn’t mean any harm. They’re just excited. The questions…” She takes a deep breath and looks Izuku in the eye with uncharacteristic directness. “What you tell us and when is up to you. We trust our teachers. If you never want to tell us what brought you here, you don’t have to. But… just for the record, I don’t think you need to be *afraid* to tell us. We really are happy to have you, Izuku. Thanks for letting us sit with you for a bit.”

Eyes stinging, Izuku reaches across the table as Yaoyorozu turns to leave. He catches himself just short of touching her, but she stops as if he had grabbed her sleeve, looking back to him. Patience and curiosity turn to concern as the tears gathered in his eyes spill over. He sniffs a rough breath through his nose, scrubbing beneath his eyes with the cuff of his sleeve.

“You can st-stay, if you w-want,” he offers, proud of himself for not sounding completely choked and equally anxious to be offering at all. Rushed, he adds, “You don’t h-have to if you don’t want t-to, ob-obviously, but you c-can, I wouldn’t m-mind…”

Belatedly, Izuku realizes that Aoyama or Tokoyami might have an opinion on the matter, and he looks between them with the faintest beginnings of panic. Aoyama smiles serenely and Tokoyami nods. Even Dark Shadow, with her obvious dislike of many social situations, doesn’t seem to resent the offer.

Yaoyorozu blinks a few times. Normally she eats with Todoroki, Izuku knows. Sometimes, Jirou joins them, but today Jirou is sitting with Ojiro and Shoji, and Yaoyorozu never joins them, so she would be going back to Todoroki. Who, just earlier, she had admitted to not

being particularly close to. If not for that, Izuku doubts he would have gathered the nerve to extend the offer at all.

But Izuku likes Yaoyorozu. She is soft spoken to the extent that she's often overlooked, but intelligent and discerning, not to mention incredibly capable, and more mellow than the majority of class 1-A, who put Izuku on edge with their well-intentioned exuberance.

After a moment, Yaoyorozu smiles, shy and hesitant. "I would love to," she says, lowering herself back into her seat. Izuku breathes a silent sigh of relief, built up tension finally unspooling along his spine.

The five of them settle into silence for the moment – Tokoyami and Yaoyorozu perhaps naturally, though Aoyama is certainly forcing himself to give Izuku some time to recover. Lunch, in general, is something that Izuku doubts can ever truly be peaceful. There are at least a hundred people in the cafeteria, talking, shrieking, yelling. Loud and abrupt noises come from every direction, only some of them easily identifiable. Even as Izuku finally starts to relax and give some focus to his meal, he remains vigilant to the things around him. No, the moment certainly isn't peaceful, but it is probably as close as it can get, and for Izuku, it's close enough.

This thought, of course, is a veritable sign to the universe, like a challenge or a dare to prove him wrong.

"Were you here yesterday?!" a voice yells, growing louder as it rapidly grows closer. "No, you weren't! I looked; I would have seen you – looking is one of my specialties!"

All of a sudden, Izuku's field of view is filled as Hatsume Mei shoves herself into the narrow gap between his seat and Tokoyami's. Surprised, Izuku leans back, accidentally bumping into Aoyama, who props Izuku up with his shoulder, so Izuku doesn't go scrambling to the floor. Mei leans in close, the crosshair in her eye expanding and contracting as if to demonstrate that she is, in fact, very good at looking.

"Where have you been, Pen Boy?!" she demands, far too loud now that she is in Izuku's personal space. "I have stuff to show you! Do you mind if I sit here?" Without waiting for a response – which would have been *how will you sit here, there's no chair* – Mei plants her butt on top of the table, swinging her legs up and around to the other side in a smooth arc that nearly catches Yaoyorozu. Mei hops down into the neighboring seat.

“I’m Hatsume Mei, future CEO of Hatsume Industries,” Mei introduces herself to a baffled Yaoyorozu. “You’re Yaoyorozu Momo. If you ever want more costume, I’m in class 1-H. Now, Pen Boy, I need you to check the balance on this.”

No further warning is given – a single innocuous statement, and then Mei reaches into one of the many blocky pouches along her belt and pulls out a knife. She slaps it onto the table with a triumphant noise. Izuku yelps. Yaoyorozu muffles a gasp behind her hands. Aoyama makes a choked noise that can’t decide between being a cough and a laugh. Dark Shadow squawks discordantly. Tokoyami remains silent, but the feathers on the crown of his head fluff out from each other, standing on end. With another noise, almost like a giggle, Dark Shadow reaches for the knife, but Tokoyami snatches it away, tucking it under the table. He holds it in his lap, knuckles white around the handle.

As uncomposed as Izuku has ever heard her, Yaoyorozu hisses, “Hatsume!”

“Call me Mei!”

“Why do you have a *knife*?”

“So Pen Boy can check the balance. I thought I already said that.”

“You can’t just carry a knife around the school!”

“No one stopped me.”

“Did they *know*?”

Mei thinks for a second. “I don’t see how they would’ve. I didn’t tell anyone.” Yaoyorozu stares at her, horrified. The odd noise in Aoyama’s throat finally settles on laughter.

“Hello, you *merveilleux mécanicien,”* he greets.

Mei smiles blankly. “Hi, I don’t know what that means.” Aoyama laughs again. “Anyway, the knife. Balance? Good? You’re the one who’s going to need to use it, so give it a whirl.”

“Me?” Izuku asks.

“Yes, you, dummy. You promised you’d let me make your babies–” Yaoyorozu repeats the word in a small, strained voice, “–so here I am!

By the way, I am very annoyed that you haven't come to the studio. It has been three whole days Pen Boy, get with it, chop chop! Also, do you want a jet pack? I remember you liked the jet pack. That was only a prototype. I could make you an even better one. And don't forget about the knife! I need to know! Balance is key, Pen Boy!"

Beneath the table, Tokoyami passes Izuku the knife. Izuku glances around, sure that someone is going to pop out of thin air and lock him up in chains for this – like they needed any reason to, on top of the Shinsou incident. He weighs the blade in his palm, spins it a few times. It feels impeccable, and he tells Mei as much. Too nervous to pass it back to her, he rests it on his thigh and tries to arrange the hem of his jacket to conceal it.

"I'll make it better before it's finalized," she assures him, even though Izuku hadn't offered any complaints. "Now – jetpack?"

"Uh, no. No jetpack."

"No jetpack?!" she groans and glares at him as if he has personally wronged her. Izuku just shrugs under the brunt of her discontent. With the quirks at his disposal, a jetpack would be more of a burden than a boon. Of course, Mei doesn't exactly know that, but he has the sneaking suspicion that the information wouldn't have made a difference in her offer or her displeasure in his rejection.

Mutinously, Mei mutters under her breath, "Your designs are so simple." The corner of Izuku's mouth twitches, amused, but still a bit too nervous to smile considering the weapon in his lap.

"P-practical," he corrects.

"Boring!" She pouts at him, then shakes her head rapidly. "You should come to the studio after lunch. I've got more stuff to show you, and! Some ideas! That are 'practical,'" she mimes dramatic air quotes around the word, "*and* super cool!"

"I have class." Mei blinks at him as if the thought has never occurred to her. Likely, it never has. The twitching at the corner of his mouth intensifies as Izuku actively tries to repress a smile. Mei narrows her eyes.

"*Fuck* class!" she declares. Yaoyorozu gasps again, sending Mei a scandalized look. Izuku ducks his head as the people sitting nearest to them all fall quiet, glancing curiously at Mei's commotion. Mei herself looks terribly proud of her proclamation.

With gleeful rebellion, Dark Shadow echoes, "*Fuck class!*"

"Dark Shadow!" Tokoyami groans.

"I like you," Mei decides, reaching across the table to give Dark Shadow a high five. Dark Shadow, at first very confused by the gesture, enthusiastically returns it when she realizes what is happening. "You're my new favorite."

"Izuku is my favorite," Dark Shadow tells Mei, earning another groan from Tokoyami. Izuku feels himself flush red, pulling at the curls on his forehead until they cover his eyes.

Mei nods agreeably, then asks, "Who's Izuku?"

Aoyama, watching the interaction like it's his favorite television program, breaks down laughing again, wrapping his arms around his stomach and leaning forward until his forehead rests on the table. Even Yaoyorozu is biting her lip, holding back mirth, despite her obvious confusion, edging close to distaste, towards Mei's behavior. Dark Shadow attempts to use the moment as a distraction to sneak the knife from Izuku's lap, but Tokoyami spots her, wrapping his arms around her face before she can get too far.

And Izuku still feels like everything is about to go wrong. Things can't stay *right* forever, they just can't. Moments like these, foreign and joyful as they are, are strictly rationed in life. He will only get so many, and then he will go back to starving, he's sure. Someday, the other shoe will drop, like an executioner's blade, like a body limp on a hanging post. But until then –

Until then, Izuku can pretend that he's just a regular fifteen-year-old, making friends for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

> Izuku: *is having an emotional crisis*
> Aizawa: Oh fuck. Here, have a cat.
>
> Izuku: You know, this is actually almost peaceful
> Mei: *busts through the wall like the Kool-Aid man*
>
> Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part V
> Update: **Jul 15**

Brainwashing - Part V

Chapter Notes

> It's time for the Mediated Conversation. Probably the longest single scene I have ever written. Did it need to be this long? Probably not! Did I write it all anyway? I wouldn't be me if I didn't! If there are any blatant missteps on Mic or Aizawa's parts, that's just because I don't know the first thing about Conversation Mediation – really, they are acting more as just-in-case supervisors than actual participants. I humbly request that you suspend disbelief just a little, if necessary. Obligatory disclaimer that I don't know shit about shit <3
>
> Now the Discord memes!
> Slushy: X X X X X X X X X X X X X X
> Ume: X
>
> ALSO, last thing – have a modest handful of illustrations from chapters two and three. CW for the sludge villain and minor injury/blood :)
> ch2 s6
> ch3 s3
> ch3 s5

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hitoshi is soup.

He has been doing some thinking since yesterday afternoon, arguably too much, and he has decisively concluded, with the specific kind of certainty possessed only by the enlightened or exhausted – or perhaps both, considering that the more thinking Hitoshi does, the less sleep he gets – that he is soup. Now, that may sound like nonsense, but bear with him.

First, there's the broth of confusion. Broth is the base of any good soup, and Hitoshi's has been boiled down for potency. His restless night has only served to cement the fact that he has no idea what's going on. Trying to slot the pieces of the puzzle together just gives him a headache – not that that has stopped him from turning the situation around in his mind, failing over and over to find an angle from which things make sense. The only conclusion he has to show for all his hard work is that he is confused. And also, possibly an idiot.

Next there's the chunks – because a soup without chunks is just an oddly savory drink, and that's a hill Hitoshi will die on. Hitoshi Soup calls for some roughly diced cubes of resentment and bitterness. Admittedly, after the whole fiasco, Hitoshi can't find it in himself to direct any of those feelings towards Midoriya, but they're still there, just kind of bobbing aimlessly in the broth.

Finally, sprinkled over top like a melted cheese – self-loathing. Because Hitoshi fucked up, somehow. He doesn't regret calling Midoriya on his bullshit, but Hitoshi can acknowledge that he quickly became the asshole in that conversation. It's not even that hindsight is 20/20 – he knew at the time that he shouldn't have been running his mouth like that, and he chose to do it anyway, even after it became obvious that he was whacking a wasps' nest with a stick. Worst part is, he's pretty sure that Midoriya's the one who ended up getting stung. Hitoshi doesn't have any excuses. The only explanation he can offer is that being an asshole is apparently the one thing that comes naturally to him.

So, there's the recipe. Put some hard-to-swallow bitterness and resentment into a base of confusion, shred some self-loathing over the top, and that's Shinsou Hitoshi's patented special. Congratulations, it tastes like shit. Hitoshi has been stewing in it. The bitterness coats his mouth; the self-loathing gives him heartburn.

"Ready to go, Listener?" Yamada-Sensei asks. While Hitoshi stared resolutely at his desk, his classmates have all dispersed to go home or attend whatever after school activities they invest their time into. Hitoshi's chest burns when he swallows, as if the acid from his stomach is encroaching on his throat, but he nods without looking at Yamada.

This morning, Hitoshi's homeroom teacher had approached him very gently to suggest that he and Midoriya talk after class to "sort things out." It was made abundantly clear that Hitoshi could say no if he wanted to – and boy did he want to. He can't really see any conversation that he's involved in going well. His track record provides ample evidence for his complete lack of diplomacy, or even civility. Hitoshi agreed anyway.

Yamada claps once, a sharp, abrupt noise puncturing Hitoshi's apprehensive silence. "Great! Then follow me!" With excessive enthusiasm, Yamada leads the way to the teachers' lounge, holding the door open and gesturing a much more subdued Hitoshi inside. Several teachers look up as he enters and Hitoshi slouches down under

their curious eyes.

“I need the room!” Yamada announces, reversing the motion he just made to usher Hitoshi in, shooing everyone else out. Two of the room’s occupants comply, with only a shrug and a shaken head. Hitoshi shrinks slightly away from them, avoiding their eyes as they pass him by. From the couch, Kayama-Sensei raises her eyebrows. She sits with her feet up on the cushion next to her, bare, heels discarded to the side, a bag of chips open in her lap.

“I’m a teacher,” she says. “I’m lounging.” Pointedly, she pops a chip into her mouth, crunching it loudly.

“Everyone out!” Yamada gestures again, exaggeratedly sweeping his arm back and forth. “This is a hostile takeover!”

“I’m grading,” Snipe-Sensei says flatly, pointing at the haphazard pile of papers in front of him.

“Grade in your office!”

“My office smells like gunpowder.”

Kayama scrunches up her nose. “That’s not your office. That’s just you.”

“Izuku should be here, soon,” Yamada says. Hitoshi thinks, for a moment, that the seeming non sequitur must be for his benefit, but Yamada is looking at Snipe with a teasing smile, just a touch malicious.

“Right,” Snipe says, standing abruptly. “I’ll grade in my office, then.” He gathers his papers into a neat stack and leaves to the backtrack of Kayama’s laughter.

“Better run!” she calls after him. “Don’t want the scary fifteen-year-old to catch you!” Snipe flips her off as he goes, hiding his middle finger behind his hand like that will prevent Hitoshi from figuring out what he’s doing. Yamada waves Snipe off cheerfully, then looks expectantly to Kayama. He clears his throat, wiggles the door slightly on its hinges. With a put-upon sigh that makes her fringe flutter over her forehead, Kayama stands.

“Fine,” she relents, rolling up the top of her bag of chips and stashing them under her arm as she crouches to retrieve her shoes. “I’ll go. But you owe me! Really, you could have used any room in the building,

but no – you just had to pick the one I'm in."

"Yep!" Yamada chirps. "This is an intentional attack against you, personally! Now scram!"

Kayama's theatrical pout gives way to giggles at Yamada's bright grin, and she crosses the room on bare feet, heels dangling from her fingers by their straps. With her free hand, she ruffles Hitoshi's hair as she passes, and he reflexively bats her hand away before freezing up with his arm half-raised and his shoulders hunched up towards his ears.

"Tell Izu I said hi," she says, patting Yamada on the arm as she exits. He closes the door behind her.

"How are you feeling?" Yamada-Sensei asks when they're left alone. Hitoshi blinks, still standing stiffly near the door, even as Yamada grabs a chair from the table, drags it across from the couch, and collapses into it, legs sprawling out in front of him. Yamada nods to the couch. "Take a seat! It's the comfiest couch in the building, you know."

Hitoshi stares at the piece of furniture for a moment, plush navy-blue cushions faded in their centers. When he sits, he sinks in slightly, as if the couch is fighting his attempts to perch on its edge by pulling him backwards. It is comfortable, he'll admit, and Hitoshi wonders if this is why Yamada brought him here, specifically. Comfortable couch for an uncomfortable conversation. Maybe Hitoshi is reading too much into it, but it puts him slightly at ease, nonetheless.

"So?" Yamada prompts. "Feelings? You doing okay?"

"Oh. Oh, uh, yeah, I – I'm fine." This is probably an obvious oversimplification, at best. Hitoshi isn't *fine* – he's soup. But he's not going to get into all that, right now. He suspects the whole analogy would make far less sense if he said it aloud. Hitoshi squirms, settling more firmly into his corner of cushions. Still, Yamada just smiles and nods, not pressing.

"I'm glad. Let me know if that changes. You don't have to be here, and you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to, ya dig?"

After a moment, Hitoshi realizes he is meant to reply. "I… dig. It's dug."

When the door opens a moment later, Hitoshi's fingers tighten on the arm of the couch, nails digging into the fabric like claws before he

forces himself to relax. He smooths his expression to an approximation of unimpressed boredom, meeting Aizawa's similar, though likely more convincing, mask as the man enters the room. Midoriya follows him in, guiding the door as it closes so it doesn't slam shut, eyes fixed on the handle while Aizawa drags a chair next to Yamada's. Door latched into place, Midoriya turns, bending at the waist so abruptly that Hitoshi is briefly disoriented.

"I'm sorry," Midoriya says, voice forced into such evenness that it's nearly inscrutable, especially with his face directed towards to floor. "I acted rashly and lashed out, and I'm sorry. However, I know that an apology doesn't reverse my actions or the harm I've done. If you speak to Nedzu about my behavior, he'll see that it's reported to the proper authorities and dealt with appropriately."

Any composure Hitoshi managed to gather melts away under the brunt of *soup*. To hear of rashness, of lashing out, of harm and inappropriate behavior from *Midoriya* – it calls forth all the confusion, the bitterness, the self-loathing as intensely as ever. *Hitoshi* is the one who threw shit at the fan, but Midoriya is here apologizing for Hitoshi-doesn't-even-know what.

"No," Hitoshi blurts. "What? Stand up." The words come out too aggressive, like an order instead of a request, but after a second, Midoriya listens. His face is blank when he first straightens, disconcertingly so, but cracks of uncertainty quickly spread through that facade. He clasps his hands behind his back. His too-big eyes are too expressive, doubtful, trepidatious, and contrite. Rather than look at him, Hitoshi stares at a frayed thread sticking out of a seam on the arm of the couch.

"Take a seat, Izuku," Yamada says.

Midoriya glances from Yamada to the couch and back again. Silently, he does as told, pressing himself into the corner opposite to Hitoshi, more than an entire empty cushion left between them. With a quick look at Hitoshi, Midoriya carefully removes his shoes, setting them neatly to the side and folding his knees up against his chest. His socks are black, but the toes are covered by a cartoonish white cat head, with wide blue eyes. Stupidly, Hitoshi wants to ask where Midoriya got them. He bites his tongue around the impulse.

"Alright," Yamada says when Midoriya is settled. "Now, we're meant to be having a *conversation*." Hitoshi ducks his head to hide a grimace. "There has been a misunderstanding between you – more likely,

several misunderstandings. We want to help clear those up, so the two of you can move forward on the same page. That means trying to keep an open mind. Izuku – no jumping to conclusions; Shinsou – no making assumptions."

From the corner of his eye, Hitoshi sneaks a look at Midoriya, who stares at the ground with one arm wrapped around his shins. The other hand fiddles with the silver bracelet around his wrist. For the first time, Hitoshi notices a scar beneath the metal, mottled pale and pink, uneven skin stretching into the shadow beneath Midoriya's sleeve.

Misunderstandings. That would make sense. Hitoshi has the distinct feeling that hasn't understood anything.

"There are three major things I want to address," Yamada begins. "Your match during the sports festival, Shinsou's transfer, and the incident yesterday along with Izuku's… history." Hitoshi bristles when his name is said, but he still notices Yamada's hesitation, the cautious way he presents his third point. Simultaneously, Midoriya closes his hand around his wrist, covering metal and scar tissue in a tight grip. Yamada continues, "These are just guidelines. If you want to talk about something I didn't mention, feel free – and if there's something you *don't* want to talk about, then you only have to say so. No questions asked. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Hitoshi and Midoriya both echo. Hitoshi, rote; Midoriya, soft. The silence that follows dogs Hitoshi's heels too closely, his pulse too loud in his ears in the absence of words.

"I," he starts without thinking. He swallows. "I'm still pissed about the match." Hitoshi slumps back into the couch to disguise his wince. Immediately, he wishes he hadn't said that. It's true, but probably too confrontational to begin with. He can already feel himself teetering towards defensive, an echo of the day before. He looks between Aizawa, seeming bored, and Yamada, patiently expectant, and explains, a touch desperately, "It feels – it feels ruined. This thing I was so proud of is something to be ashamed of now."

"It was selfish of me," Midoriya says quietly, turning his head towards Hitoshi so he's not speaking into his knees.

"You made me into a cheater," Hitoshi accuses, words coming out stilted as he tries to put his thoughts into words as decently as possible. Vitriol wants to spill out of his mouth, but Hitoshi let enough

of it out yesterday. Today, he'll keep it confined to his head. Or he'll do his best to, anyway.

Midoriya made him into a cheater, made Hitoshi into something he has spent his whole life diligently defying. Hitoshi isn't really prone to moral dilemmas, confident in his own ability to distinguish between right and wrong, to do the right thing, even when he is uniquely able to get away with the wrong one. Except Midoriya didn't even give him the choice, and now Hitoshi has gotten the thing he wanted most the *wrong way*. It feels like fate, in a cruel way. Like the world is telling him that everyone was right, that he will never be able to be what he wants to be the way he wants to be it.

"I'm sorry," Midoriya says. As genuine as he sounds, the uselessness of the sentiment still makes something thorny twist in Hitoshi's gut. "But you didn't cheat, Shinsou. You didn't k-know. If I had a-asked you would have said n-no. It just – it didn't e-even occur to me to a-ask, and that was *m-me*. My fault."

Hitoshi breathes deeply through his nose. "Your fault," he says shortly. "My consequences." Midoriya looks at him, practically dripping with remorse. Hitoshi can't meet his eyes. Midoriya nods, wordless acceptance of Hitoshi's complaints. This time, at least for a second, Hitoshi is grateful for the silence.

He's said his piece. He could say more, but he'll exercise some basic self-control to avoid making things worse for them both. He's heard Midoriya's apology. This time, he even listened. He's still angry. But he can be angry without being an asshole – he can manage that much.

Yesterday, Midoriya's explanations had made anger flare in Hitoshi, branching through his nervous system like lightening, blinding and deafening. Anger lingers in him like a static charge that makes his jaw clench and his heart thump irregularly, but the heat of it has cooled to something mostly manageable, no longer overloading his thoughts.

Instead of saying more, Hitoshi looks at Aizawa and Yamada. Belatedly, it occurs to him that they have been listening – that to listen, to have known what to talk about to begin with, they need to have known about the match. Either they have known from the beginning, or they found out when Hitoshi did. The realization carries a spike of panic through his ribs.

"Do I still get to transfer?" he asks. "Even though the – the match–"

His transfer was one of the points on Yamada's little list, wasn't it?

Hitoshi is being transferred for winning the festival – a feat that he didn't actually accomplish, not honestly. Certainly, they wouldn't be so cruel as to put him through all this *conversation* if he's going to be stuck in gen ed, not without telling him first, at least. Except systemic cruelty is one of Hitoshi's earliest experiences, and he's learned the hard way that he should never assume the best.

"Take a breath," Yamada coaches gently.

"Yes," Aizawa answers. "You were up for transfer before that match. Your specific placement didn't make a difference in the offer you were given." Panic is replaced by relief for only a brief moment before it's eclipsed by a spiteful thought.

"Is *that* why I'm in extra training?" Hitoshi asks. "Because I didn't really beat Midoriya?"

"Well, why do you think you're in extra training?" Yamada asks in return.

Hitoshi's mouth twitches. Answering a question with a question, just great. Why is Hitoshi in extra training? Where to start? Because he didn't rightfully beat Midoriya. Because physical quirks are favored over mental ones. Because no one trusted Brainwashing, specifically.

Before he can settle on a suitably scathing reply, Aizawa elaborates, "Do you feel like you're ready to transfer?"

Yes, Hitoshi thinks. Of course he is.

He fumbles the thought before it can be translated into words. The tip of his tongue catches between his teeth as he snaps his mouth shut.

He won the sports festival. Barely. Even ignoring his match with Midoriya, Hitoshi barely won. He got lucky.

Hitoshi's not the type to turn his nose up at luck – half of success is hard work, and the other half is pure dumb luck. A lucky win is still a win. But he imagines fighting Bakugou again, without all that good fortune on his side. Hitoshi pales.

Then, blood creeps back into his face, flushing as he remembers the quirk apprehension test Aizawa subjected him to just two days ago. Hitoshi has mediocre strength and stamina, and piss poor coordination. As mortifying as it is, he's not so delusion that he can't admit that much to himself. Half of success is dumb luck, and the

other half is pure hard work. Hard work Hitoshi has barely done, hard work he didn't even know the definition of until Aizawa sat him down to develop a diet and exercise regime.

"I'm not trying to shame you," Aizawa says after letting his question sink in. "I know the delay of your transfer must be frustrating, but you're not falling behind. You're catching up. As long as you put in the work, improvement is inevitable. But it's also *necessary*."

"What about Midoriya? If he's already been transferred, why does he need additional training? It's not like he needs to catch up to anyone." Hitoshi asks without thinking. He asked the same question at the very beginning of their training together and received a definitive *it's none of your business* in response. At the time, Hitoshi was asking primarily from a place of resentment, while it's mostly simple curiosity that drives the words out of his mouth, now. Still, regardless of his motivation, it's no more Hitoshi's business now than it was, then. He ducks his head, waiting for Aizawa to tell him as much.

Midoriya's voice comes as a surprise. "Do you want to move on to point th-three, then?" When Hitoshi looks up, Midoriya smiles, tentative and fragile, like he is trying to lighten a heavy mood.

Point three.

Midoriya's… history.

Disparate pieces of information rise to the forefront of Hitoshi's mind. All the things Hitoshi already knows, even if he doesn't really know what any of them mean. A dead father and a confession. Hurt and hopelessness. Rehabilitation programs and villainy. Quirks that aren't what they seem. Shards of a larger image that Hitoshi doesn't have context for and can't fully comprehend.

A heavy mood, indeed. With his scattered freckles, cat socks, and frail smile, Midoriya looks a bit like Atlas, carrying the weight of an unknown world on his shoulders.

But Hitoshi is assuming again.

"Yeah," Hitoshi says, confirmation sticking in his suddenly dry mouth. "Yeah, I – if you're, uh, okay with that."

"Mhmm," Midoriya hums. He spins one of his bracelets around with a thoughtful look on his face. "E-everyone's gonna know ev-event-tually. It's kinda f-funny, actually. I think it might be easier to t-tell you."

Midoriya's smile gains some strength. For a moment, he is not just smiling, but smiling *at Hitoshi*, very specifically – though Hitoshi can't even begin to guess where in their past interactions Midoriya decided he was someone worth smiling at. Hitoshi adjusts the hem of his jacket while Midoriya continues, "So, um, training. I need to gain *c-comfort and confidence* with my q-quirk. It's s-suppressed for most of the day and I – well, I don't l-like it very much."

With distant eyes, Midoriya stares at his knees. His smile is still plastered over his face, but it twists into a melancholic rictus, almost like he isn't smiling at all, even with his mouth quirked up at the corners. He slides his bracelet back and forth, and Hitoshi realizes abruptly what the bracelets are. Quirk suppressing bands.

Rubbing his thumb over the silver cuff one last time, Midoriya pivots on the couch so he is facing Hitoshi, folding his legs under him and tangling his hands together in his lap. Hitoshi glances at Aizawa and Yamada. Yamada watches with evident, if reserved, sadness. Aizawa has softened slightly as well, an almost imperceptible shift in the careful disinterest of his expression that makes him look just a little more approachable. Hitoshi turns back to Midoriya, following the other boy's lead to face him more fully, even if Hitoshi still can't bear to make eye contact, can barely manage to sit still in the increasingly solemn atmosphere.

"What do you think my quirk is?" Midoriya asks.

"I'm guessing it's not pyrokinesis," Hitoshi responds. It's the best answer he has; it makes him feel like an idiot.

"No, it's not," Midoriya confirms. When he falls silent, Hitoshi starts to think that Midoriya might actually make him play a guessing game. Then, Midoriya says, "My quirk allows me to take other peoples' quirks." Every word is carefully measured and annunciated, slow and tediously steady.

"Like that blonde asshole?" Hitoshi asks. Midoriya, watching him intently, blinks and tilts his head. Hitoshi rubs the back of his neck, shooting another look at his teachers. "I mean, uh, Monoma. Yeah."

"No. Monoma can copy other quirks – a limited number, for a limited time, without affecting the original quirk. I can *t-take* them. Inf-fintely, f-forever, only o-one and it's *m-mine.* Not copied. S-st-stolen."

"Oh." Hitoshi says. Then the words catch up with him, and his brows furrow together as he shakes his head. "Wait, no. That's not – that's

not possible."

"It shouldn't be."

Three words, said with the weight of an entire dictionary. Spoken, resigned and tragic. A horrifying reality that *should not* exist, but does, despite all logic, despite all common knowledge, common sense.

It makes no sense. Quirks can't be stolen. Copied or blocked, yeah, sure – but *stolen?* They're genetic. Hitoshi doesn't need to be good at science to know that that's not how genetics *work*. It's preposterous, ridiculous, *impossible*.

But Hitoshi thinks of the unexplainable variety of Midoriya's abilities, thinks of the fog that settled over him for a brief moment the day before, thinks of the way his own quirk eluded him in the aftermath like it never has before. And then, even though it's impossible, Hitoshi thinks, *dear god, it's true*.

"That's horrifying," Hitoshi breathes. The arm of the couch presses hard against his spine. His heart lurches sickeningly at the back of his throat.

"Yeah," Midoriya agrees.

"How many?" Hitoshi asks.

He counts to himself. The pyrokinesis. The black, dagger-like fingertips. The arcing electricity. The strength. That's four, right there. Four quirks that Midoriya has – that he had apparently stolen. Does that mean that there are four corresponding people out there with no quirks at all?

"Shinsou, that's not–"

Midoriya interrupts Yamada's careful hedging, "103."

"Holy shit. Holy fuck."

103 quirks. *103 people.*

Hitoshi lurches to his feet. Midoriya watches him, still oozing the same resigned tragedy from *it shouldn't be*. Yamada stands as well, reaching for Hitoshi with a placating gesture that Hitoshi staggers a step to the side to avoid. Aizawa remains seated, eyes roaming between everyone in the room with a laziness Hitoshi is sure is

deceptive, a hand wrapped loosely in the lower loops of his scarf. Everyone watches Hitoshi the most, like he might fly off the handle and do something horrible. Which feels pretty ironic when he considers *103 people*, but right now, Hitoshi is more worried about how light his head feels, how the floor seems to sway beneath him, how is stomach is trying to crawl out of his body.

Hitoshi staggers to the nearest window, wrenching it open to hang his head outside. The ground looks farther away than it should. Hitoshi closes his eyes. He doesn't throw up, and he stays there for an immeasurable moment, until he can be sure that he won't. When he can swallow without tasting acid between his teeth, Hitoshi turns back to the room, slumping against the wall and sliding down it until he is sitting on the floor.

"Fuck," he gasps, tilting his head back. "That's – a lot."

"What Izuku isn't telling you," Aizawa says, "is that the theft was involuntary." God, the hits just keep coming. Hitoshi squeezes his eyes shut, pressing a balled-up fist hard to his forehead.

"Shinsou?" Yamada ventures delicately. "How can I help?"

"Just – give me a moment," Hitoshi bites out. He inhales deeply and exhales slowly. His head swims, his stomach churns, his eyes burn. He feels irrational, a bit insane, even. Aizawa, Midoriya, and Yamada all seem wary of *him*, but otherwise unaffected by what is, without competition, the largest and most horrifying revelation of Hitoshi's life.

Midoriya can steal quirks – because that is apparently possible. He has 103 of them. And as willing as Midoriya was to let Hitoshi's imagination run away with how that number came to be, the quirks were either stolen unintentionally or under duress. All those horrible pieces, those little bits that Hitoshi couldn't understand the whole of, suddenly make a lot more sense, coming together to create a picture that Hitoshi could have gladly gone his whole life without seeing.

"Your dad."

Something clatters across the floor. Hitoshi opens his eyes. Aizawa stands, his chair crooked and several inches further back than it was. Yamada has a hand on his arm. On the couch, Midoriya is curled into his knees again, eyes wide and covered with a wet film. Hitoshi hears the echo of his own voice in his ears, only after he's already spoken, far too late to take the words back.

“What do you know about that?” Aizawa asks, cutting. Firm and sharp as it is, the question feels like a knife pressed against Hitoshi’s throat. He struggles to swallow.

“Sit *down*, Shouta,” Yamada orders, tugging at Aizawa’s elbow.

“I’m sorry!” Hitoshi says, practically shouts, looking frantically between Aizawa and Yamada before his eyes settle on Midoriya. Midoriya, who still looks like he’s been struck. “Before the third event – you and Bakugou. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. Or, I did mean to, but I – I wouldn’t have if I had known what you were talking about. I just – did you really – you know?” Hitoshi’s eyes widen as his mouth gets ahead of him again. He shakes his head rapidly, scrambling to his feet. “Fuck, don’t – don’t answer that. Jesus. I’ll go.”

Conversations. Honestly, *fuck* conversations. Nothing good ever comes from talking to people, not when you’re as bad at it as Hitoshi is. Hitoshi thinks he might have preferred to live forever in his confusion soup than deal with – whatever this has become. Yesterday, he was whining about his own life like an oblivious little bitch baby, and today he just directly asked if Midoriya had actually murdered his father. Way to go, Hitoshi. No matter how bad things get, he can always rely on himself to make them worse.

He leans down to snatch his bag up from its place next to the couch, fully prepared to leave and ignore this whole situation until he’s forced to face it during tomorrow’s training. As he straightens up, Midoriya lunges forward, as if to grab Hitoshi, only for both of them to stagger back before they touch. Midoriya kneels on the couch, reaching hand pulled back to hang onto the lapel of his jacket, mouth half-open. Yamada catches Hitoshi by the shoulder when he nearly trips over his own feet.

“Don’t go,” Midoriya says, the weakness of his voice contrasting with the flurry of motion he just launched himself into. “You – I mean, you can g-go if you want, obv-viously, but d-don’t. I, uh, we – we’re not d-done. I – you can st-stay.” He makes a listless gesture that Hitoshi can’t interpret. “I d-did.”

“Did what?” Hitoshi asks dumbly. Yamada’s fingers, still closed around Hitoshi’s shoulder, tighten, pressing five points of dull ache into Hitoshi’s skin.

“I d-did what I h-had to d-d-d–”

“Oh fuck, no!” For a childish second, Hitoshi raises his hands to cover

his ears before forcing his arms back down to his sides, clenching his fists until his nails dig into his palms. He shakes his head. “No, fuck, sorry. Just stop. I, uh, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No,” Aizawa says flatly. “You shouldn’t have.” Despite his general lack of intonation, he sounds accusing. Hitoshi can’t blame him.

Hitoshi squares his shoulders, facing Midoriya more directly than he has for the entire conversation. It’s hard to look Midoriya in the eyes, especially when tears are clumping his lashes together, but Hitoshi forces himself.

“Look, Midoriya. I’m sorry. For, uh, a lot of things. Not for being mad,” he adds, unable to resist, hurrying on, “but I’m sorry for – for being mad at you for things that weren’t your fault. And for saying – that shit I said. And, um, I’m sorry that I kept saying shit, even when I knew I should have stopped. Also, for the shit I said here and now. I – I say a lot of shit. It’s, uh, it’s kind of a chronic condition.” He grinds his teeth together to get himself to *stop* pursuing this particular line of shit to say. Trying to choose his words precisely, he continues, “You don’t need to tell me this stuff. You don’t, like, owe me answers just because I’m an asshole.”

Yamada clicks his tongue. “Hey,” he says, background noise to Hitoshi’s ears, almost static, “let’s try to avoid the negative self-talk, yeah?”

Midoriya talks over him, “But I stole your quirk.”

“Yeah,” Hitoshi says, and damn if that isn’t an odd statement to agree with. “But you gave it back.” He blinks, a new thought suddenly occurring to him. “Wait – you did give it back, right? Like, that’s a thing you can do, isn’t it?” Hands suddenly shaking, Hitoshi pats himself down, as if he can find his quirk stashed in one of his pockets.

Now that he thinks about it, he hasn’t used his quirk since yesterday – yesterday, when he tried and failed to use it against Midoriya, failure that apparently resulted from Midoriya *stealing* his quirk. Funny how Hitoshi has spent his whole life dreaming of having a better quirk, but the idea of losing Brainwashing entirely sets him on the edge of breakdown. There are a lot of ways that Hitoshi hates his quirk, but it’s still his, still *him*, and he can’t actually imagine living without it.

Waving his hands frantically in front of him, Midoriya shakes his head, curls flopping over his eyes. “Of course I gave it back! I n-never should have t-taken it to begin with!” Hitoshi breathes a sigh of relief,

reeling slightly from the emotional whiplash. Really, Hitoshi is built for feelings like irritation, boredom, maybe some frustration – not this emotional rollercoaster of revelations and realizations.

"Alright then," he says after getting his bearings back. "I don't, uh, really see the problem, then? I mean, I'm still sorry."

Midoriya blinks. "But. I stole your quirk."

"Like, maybe don't do that again, but, um – I did start the whole," he waves a vague hand, frustrated with his own ineloquence, "*thing*."

"I *stole* your *quirk!"* Midoriya's voice rises to an unpleasant pitch. Hitoshi grimaces, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling and fidgeting with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"Yeah, well – that doesn't mean I was any less of a dick? And I was kind of being a dick on purpose, so really it's – it's kind of my own fault?"

"So, what?" Midoriya asks, sounding hollow and unmoored. "You're just… *okay* with me taking your quirk?"

"Oh, hell no," Hitoshi responds automatically, too vehemently. He shudders and presses his tongue hard to the roof of his mouth. "But, like – you gave it back, right. So it's not… it's not that different than what I do, is it?"

Hitoshi thinks of all the people who distrust him because he has the capacity to violate their autonomy. He remembers the sports festivals, the boys who withdrew, who warned Hitoshi's competitors away from him. Years of whispers and wary looks that Hitoshi had done nothing to deserve except exist. Then, he thinks of Midoriya's rapid, enthusiastic words in the wake of being brainwashed, the excited grin even after Hitoshi had used him like a puppet and hurt him in the process. If Midoriya can be like that, after everything, then Hitoshi can at least try to – meet him halfway, maybe. Be decent about this one thing, even if his heart is still pounding a bruise into his sternum.

"No, Shinsou," Midoriya says. He is not grinning, now. He is glowering, crooked eyebrows drawn together, tears welling up in his eyes as he narrows them. "It's – it's completely d-different. I'm a *v-villain*."

"You are *not,"* Aizawa interrupts. Midoriya ignores him.

“I have st-stolen *103 quirks*. G-giving *yours* b-back doesn’t ch-cha-*change* that. I’m – I’m not – I’m the b-bad guy h-here, Sh-Sh-Shi– You should r-report me.”

“Izuku,” Yamada intervenes, simultaneously soft and stern, “we talked about this, remember? How Shinsou feels and what he does about it is up to *him*.”

“No!” Midoriya protests. From their interaction to this point, Hitoshi hadn’t thought Midoriya was capable of this kind of defiance, but he turns the green fury of his glare on Yamada without hesitation. “He doesn’t g-get it! He doesn’t u-underst-stand what’s going on! He sh-should–”

“Hey!” Hitoshi interrupts, voice loud and deep over Midoriya’s strained rambling. “Fuck you! I’m not – I’m not an idiot! You told me what’s going on – I get it, alright? I get it, and if I want to forgive you for it, you can’t fucking stop me!” Hitoshi meets Midoriya’s angry look with a scowl of his own.

As they stare at each other, Midoriya’s frustrated ire quickly drains into something startled, expression too complicated for Hitoshi to fully interpret. The *fuck you*, he realizes, was probably an unnecessary addition, but he raises his chin and sticks to it. If he’s being an asshole again – well, he’s already acknowledged that it really is the only thing that comes naturally to him.

“I–” Midoriya cuts himself off, looking away from Hitoshi to stare at the ground with quickly-blinking eyes. “You really–” he huffs a shaky burst of air. Hitoshi shifts on his heels as Midoriya covers his face with a hand, suddenly overcome with uncomfortable terror at the possibility that he has fully reduced Midoriya to tears.

Then, Midoriya collapses into the couch, hanging his head against the back of it while he stares at the ceiling. He laughs. It’s a complex sound, a bit too giggly not to have some hysteria involved, but still unmistakably bright, light.

Shrugging his shoulders up towards burning ears, Hitoshi glances at Aizawa and Yamada from the corner of his eye. Aizawa sits in his chair, relaxed, finally drained of the tension that Hitoshi’s freak out had called forth. Yamada stands to the side, a hand on Aizawa’s shoulder. It’s hard to get a read on them from such an angle, but Hitoshi thinks they might be surprised, maybe pleased, maybe even a touch amused.

These people all have shitty senses of humor, Hitoshi concludes. When Midoriya stops laughing, he keeps smiling, a breathless thing, like the sun above clouds. Hitoshi ignores the steady twitch of his own mouth, the small smile that's insistently trying to break past his teeth, just as stubbornly as he ignores the spasm and thump of his of heart and head.

Chapter End Notes

> Look, look. There was supposed to be a scene of Izuku hiding out in the teachers' lounge during his first lunch period, and there was going to be this whole exchange between him and Snipe – where Snipe tries to apologize, except Snipe is emotionally stunted and Izuku hardly even remembers/cares about getting shot – but it was a victim of the massive Scene Culling, so instead I've just ended up with a Snipe who awkwardly and inexplicably avoids a 15yo like his life depends on it.
>
> Yamada: Hey kiddo, how are you?
> Hitoshi: I'm,,,,,, **s o u p**
>
> Hitoshi: Well, well, well. If it isn't the consequences of my own actions.
>
> Izuku: I stole your quirk! You have to hate me!
> Hitoshi: That's a dangerous thing to say to such a contrary person, you know. Now I have to fall in love with you. Out of spite.
>
> Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part VI
> Update: Jul 22

Brainwashing - Part VI

Chapter Notes

> You get a scene and *you* get a scene – you know what? EVERYBODY GETS A SCENE!!!
> Seriously. I'm not joking. Brace yourselves.
> Brainwashing takes place in the two-week period between the sports festival and internships, and these interactions happen at various points throughout those two weeks. They are not in chronological order.
>
> Fanart corner!
> From Lila, we have a two part illustration – here's part 1 and part 2! And a Hitoshi from Sits!
>
> Now memes!
> Andy: X
> Ash: X
> Bacon: X
> Calico: X X
> Cupcake: X X X X X X
> Fola: X
> Lena: X
> Mopp: X
> Oiyzis: X
> Rhino: X
> Slushy: X X X X X X X
> Snowy: X
> Surya: X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are good days and there are bad days.

The bad days are achingly familiar, so well-worn Izuku was almost numb to them, until recently. They have begun to burn again, like the fire of screaming nerves that lines torn skin. In that sense, the bad days are worse than they have been in years, every bad second of them reaching down into the marrow of Izuku's bones, but he tells himself that it's a bit like waking up from a coma. His body, his mind – they don't always want to support him. But he is regaining the strength he has lost, bit by bit.

There are bad days and there are good days.

Sometimes, a good day can abruptly become a bad one, the change lurching through Izuku like a gravitational shift. Nedzu will poke and prod and test Izuku's limits until he finds a sore spot, and he won't stop digging his claws in until Izuku cracks. A classmate, careless, oblivious, will say something they shouldn't – or rather, they'll say something Izuku shouldn't hear. Izuku will remember something, something he that makes him sick to think of, something that makes him sick to have forgotten in the first place.

Good days. Bad days.

Good days, tenuous at best. Bad days, like a miasma, always threatening around the edges of things.

It's a change. Izuku thinks it wouldn't sound very good to most people, but to him it's – words escape him. He has *good days*. A few weeks ago, he would have said that wasn't possible, anymore.

Somedays, he wakes up, stretches lazy and warm, and tries not to disturb Lucy as he gets out of bed. He plays with Bastard, dancing around her teeth until she shrieks at him in frustration, demanding that he allow her to deliver her good morning nip. He and Eraser and Mic all eat breakfast together – or drink it, in Eraser's case – and Izuku doesn't feel like an intruder in the kitchen.

Day by day, good by bad, things continue on. And, gradually, the students surrounding Izuku morph from *class 1-A* – separate in an unattainable and poignant way, something he is apart from – into Izuku's *classmates* – classmates, friends, a group of people he is a part of.

Quirkless sparring is probably Mashirao's least favorite training exercise, for a variety of reasons.

For one thing, doing something without your quirk takes on a whole new meaning when your quirk is literally an extra limb. Blocking a blow with his tail and using it to control his movements is more than second nature to Mashirao – it's first. Especially with the degree of muscle memory he has, it takes constant focus to prevent himself from

bringing his tail into the equation. Keeping it out not only distracts him, on top of interfering with his sense of balance.

Then there's his opponents. As uncomfortable as the quirkless nature of the exercise is, the sparring in and of itself tends to be just as, if not more, frustrating for Mashirao. He's the only member of the class with extensive martial arts training, putting him at a distinct advantage in these kinds of exercises. He takes no issue with his classmates' lack of formal skill – no opponent should be underestimated. Mashirao himself has admittedly only achieved his rigid discipline by trading adaptability and improvisation, so it's not as if he never loses. The problem is that many of his classmates don't take the training seriously.

Despite his complaints, Mashirao can acknowledge the importance of learning to defend himself and others without the use of his quirk. Aizawa-Sensei is perfect evidence of how unreliable quirks can be, and while Mashirao himself doesn't have to worry about counters like Erasure, he still may find himself in a situation where his tail is unable to help him, where it may even become a hinderance.

His classmates don't all seem to see the situation as Mashirao does. They grumble, groan, roll their eyes. They don't apply themselves half as ardently as they do to exercises where they can use their quirks.

Midoriya, though – he's good enough that Mashirao is surprised. There's an obvious sloppiness to some of his forms, but he's fast and he integrates several fighting styles so smoothly that he becomes hard to predict. Through their bout, neither of them gets a distinct advantage, and they both finish breathing heavy.

"You would have had me if you were more decisive," Mashirao says, because it's true. He's noticed that Midoriya has a habit of pulling his punches, short seconds where he overthinks and hesitates. It wasn't something Mashirao could take advantage of, really, but it could spell disaster in an actual battle. Midoriya winces, flushing red and pulling at a curl on his forehead so it stretches down to his nose.

"Where did you train?" Mashirao asks. As unrefined as some of Midoriya's moves were, Mashirao still figures that the boy must have had some formal teaching, probably in a variety of martial arts, to incorporate them into his style as fluidly as he does. The question, an attempt to deflect away from Midoriya's obvious embarrassment at his shortcomings, backfires.

Midoriya shakes his head. “I, um, I don’t – I haven’t. My d-dad trained me and my br–” The sentence cuts off abruptly, Midoriya’s lips forming a pale seal over a bitten off word.

Mashirao, realizing that Midoriya isn’t going to continue, moves on, “Well, it was nice sparring with you. We should do it again, sometime. I’ve been studying martial arts practically since I could walk; I could probably help you polish up some of your moves, if you want?”

Midoriya blinks, then offers Mashirao a wobbly smile. “That would be nice.”

Rikido is kind of unreasonably embarrassed.

Is the bag too cutesy? Should he have made enough for everyone? Does Midoriya have any dietary restrictions? Does he even like sweets?

It’s far from the first time Rikido has made something his classmates, though usually he shares with the whole class, not just an individual. He did it all the time in middle school. It’s not a first, even for class 1-A. After the USJ incident, he spent the whole break stress baking, and brought in the resultant cookies for everyone to enjoy. Of course, Midoriya wasn’t there for that.

Well… he *was* there for the USJ, Rikido supposes. That’s what Aizawa-Sensei had told them, anyway, even if no one has broached the topic to Midoriya yet.

Regardless, Midoriya wasn’t there for the *cookies*. Even villains deserve cookies. Maybe villains deserve cookies even more than most people, depending on how they got to that point. Midoriya looks so sad sometimes, especially when he thinks no one’s looking. Rikido doesn’t really know why or what to do about that, but cookies always help him feel better, so.

So, he walks into the classroom and heads to Midoriya’s desk instead of his own, dropping his bag on top of the empty desk that separates Midoriya and Bakugou, who, thankfully, hasn’t arrived yet. Rikido doesn’t look at Midoriya until after he retrieves the parcel of cookies.

“I wanted to welcome you to the class,” Rikido says, holding the cookies out. Midoriya only stares at the offering with wide eyes. Flushing, Rikido explains, “I do a lot of baking and sometimes I like to share the stuff I make. They’re just sugar cookies. I wasn’t sure what you’d like, or if you have allergies or anything… I can make you something else?”

“No!” Midoriya blurts thickly, snatching the cookies from Rikido, quick but still careful. Midoriya cradles the little bag in both of his palms, like it’s delicate or precious. “I – I’m sure they’re g-great. Thank you!”

Relieved, Rikido grins and nods. “I hope you like them! Welcome to 1-A!”

Embarrassment and anxiety dispersed like so much dust in the wind, Rikido goes to his own desk to wait for class to begin, greeting Koda as he sits. At the edge of the room, Midoriya rubs the back of his arm over his eyes.

Yaoyorozu leans forward and asks, “Izuku? Are you alright?”

Rikido only just hears Midoriya reply, “Yeah, s-sorry. I – I’m g-good, actually.”

Kyoka is glad that the class is making efforts to make Midoriya feel accepted, but she doesn’t really have any plans to participate. Not like she’s really a great candidate for a welcoming committee, anyway. Thing is, Kyoka just isn’t the friendly type. She doesn’t think she’s *unfriendly*, per say, but – well, she supposes that “approachability” is one place where other peoples’ impressions of her actually matter.

According to a lot of people, Kyoka is cold, aloof, and acerbic. They also like to talk about her resting bitchface, enough that she has long since gotten bored of hearing about it. She doesn’t really care much about these opinions, because they tend to come from people who don’t actually know her, but they do kind of reflect on her ability to make friends. Friendship, to Kyoka, is a passive thing, not an active one. The best friendships just *happen*, without her needing to go out of her way to talk to or get to know someone.

That's how she and Yaoyorozu became friends. They were paired together for an early exercise and, well, Kyoka liked her. Thankfully, the feeling was mutual, and a friendship bloomed all on its own. Now, though, something similar seems to have happened between Yaoyorozu and Midoriya. She's been sitting with him, Tokoyami, and Aoyama at lunch, instead of Todoroki.

Or Kyoka.

Kyoka's happy about that, really. She knows that Yaoyorozu's not great at making friends, either. She's pretty shy and she second guesses herself a lot, so it's good that she's talking to more people. And Midoriya's lucky, too, to have Yaoyorozu around. She calls him Izuku.

Friendly type or not, Kyoka starts thinking that maybe she *should* go out of her way to talk to Midoriya. If Yaoyorozu likes him, he's probably worth getting to know. Then Yaoyorozu won't have to worry about choosing between them, or anything stupid like that.

At lunch, Kyoka slides into a serendipitously empty seat next to Yaoyorozu. Yaoyorozu offers her a surprised smile and Kyoka returns it. Of the four other people at the table, Kyoka ignores Tokoyami, Aoyama, and the support girl in favor of focusing on Midoriya, who vibrates with all the invisible tension of a strummed guitar.

"What kind of music do you like?" Kyoka asks, skipping past all the small talk to cut straight to the point. If she's trying to get to know someone, she may as well start with the bits that actually matter.

"Me?" Midoriya asks after a pause.

"Yeah, you." She already knows what everyone else is into – besides support girl, but Kyoka's not here for her.

"Classical?" Midoriya offers after a moment, though he doesn't sound too sure about it. "And, um, v-video game music. Does that count?"

At the mention of classical music, Yaoyorozu lights up just a little, though she's too demure to really express her excitement. It's only obvious to someone who knows what to look for. Midoriya probably doesn't notice.

Kyoka nods to his question. "Weird mix, but I can work with it."

“Our third pair will be Koda and Midoriya!” All Might announces while Koji fiddles with his fingers. As All Might announces the rest of the teams for today’s heroics lesson, Midoriya sidles to Koji’s side, the two of them fidgeting next to each other, waiting for the strategizing phase of the exercise to begin.

Koji hates team exercises. Which, unfortunately, is most of them. It’s not that he hates his classmates – he likes them, actually, way better than any class he’s been in before. They’re kind and understanding. For the most part, anyway. Bakugou doesn’t count, in Koji’s opinion. But even Bakugou, as caustic as he is, has never mocked Koji’s difficulty with words.

1-A accepts Koji’s silence with an easy warmth, one that doesn’t make Koji feel pressured to speak or like a burden to be accommodated. Even speechless, even as painfully shy as he is, he’s managed to make friends among his classmates.

But kindness isn’t a solution for all the other problems selective mutism can cause. Kindness can’t soothe the stabbing tightness that blocks Koji’s throat, and it can’t dissolve communication barriers. Many of his classmates have picked up a handful of basic signs, and they’re all patient with him if he needs to write down a more complex thought, but Koji doesn’t always have the nerve to interject like that – to make people wait on him while he scratches out shaky words that would be much faster to say, if only he could – and even when he does, it’s still not the smoothest process.

Group work is *hard*. It just is. Especially in heroics, when lots of complicated things need to be discussed in a strictly limited amount of time. Usually, Koji just goes along with whatever his partners decide. His own passive participation smarts, a shameful awareness of his lack of contribution that burns particularly hot when he actually has thoughts that could advance a strategy, thoughts that he almost always ends up holding back because he can’t overcome his own stupid issues. Doubtlessly, Midoriya will come up with an excellent strategy, and Koji will just uselessly nod his way through it.

“All right!” All Might booms, making Koji flinch slightly. “You all have 20 minutes, starting now!”

Everyone disperses. Koji and Midoriya stand together. Koji is familiar with just about every flavor of silence, and this is an awkward one,

the two of them existing uneasily in the same space.

“Um, you – you use JSL, r-right?” Midoriya asks. Koji, assiduously avoiding Midoriya’s eyes, is pleasantly surprised to see the careful movements of his hands, in sync with his words.

“I do! You know JSL?” Koji signs rapidly in return, excitement leaking into his fingers. Midoriya tracks his hands carefully, brow creasing in concentration.

“I’m still l-learning,” he admits, sounding overwhelmed. Embarrassed, Koji fists his hands. Midoriya’s own signing had been slow and hesitant, clean but clearly unpracticed. Koji should have realized that the other boy wasn’t as fluent as he was, but he got carried away in his happiness at the possibility.

Midoriya doesn’t seem annoyed by Koji’s slip, smiling sheepishly. “S-sorry. I might need you to go slow o-or use simple words, if that’s alright?”

Koji nods, signing, clear and deliberate, “Of course! I can help, too, if you have questions!”

Midoriya grins and Koji, simply glad to have someone to sign with, expert or not, smiles back. Despite Midoriya’s expertise with strategy, despite Koji’s earlier resignation, they come up with their plan together.

Toru isn’t a strategic genius or anything, but she has a pretty solid plan A. It does the trick nine times out of ten, in all types of situations. She’s been carefully honing this particular strategy for over a decade now, and she thinks the time investment shows in how effective it is.

Here it is – are you ready for this? *Be invisible.*

That’s right! Be invisible. People can’t stop what they can’t see. Most of the time, anyway. Nine times out of ten. Well, twelve times out of seventeen, but that doesn’t have the same ring to it. She rounds up – sue her.

Plan B isn’t as well-developed as plan A. It’s more circumstantial, too.

More of your traditional “assess the situation and respond accordingly” type deal. Really, the only concrete part of plan B is the list of people Toru needs to use it against. Todoroki, Kaminari, Yaoyorozu, Jirou, and Shoji, in case you were wondering.

Area of effect quirks and sensory quirks. AKA, the banes of Toru’s existence! Some people, it turns out, *can* stop what they can’t see – either by releasing such large attacks that they can inadvertently catch her in the crossfire or by *hearing* instead of seeing. Disgusting.

Today, the stars have aligned and none of those nasty plan B-ers are on the team Toru’s facing. She creeps down a hallway, pressed close to the wall. Plan A is about fooling more than just the eyes, and as such, she moves nearly silently. The only way someone – at least, someone *without* a sensory enhancement quirk – would hear her is if they were within a foot or two of her. In fact, it’s so hard to detect Toru that people complain about being paired against her in exercises like this all the time. She’s just that good at them!

Then, Toru trips.

Which is honestly so ridiculously foolish of her that she can’t believe it has happened for a moment, but she’s definitely on the ground. And she can’t get up.

All at once, she is forced to make a very important amendment to her thoughts.

Plan A works twelve times out of *eighteen*.

Somehow, Midoriya got close to Toru without her even noticing, pinning her to the ground and already wrenching her arms behind her back. Unlike most of the boys, he doesn’t flush or fluster away from touching her, despite her supposed nudity, robbing her of another advantage she can usually rely on. She wrestles a hand out of his grip and aims a jab for his solar plexus, hoping to wind him enough that she can get out from under him and disappear again. He catches her wrist, deftly intercepting a blow he can’t even see coming, like some kind of ninja or something. Straddling her, he brings her wrists together, binding them with capture tape before she can make another escape attempt.

“*How?”* she groans, when the struggle is as good as over, disqualified and discontent.

Now Midoriya blushes, freckles stark against the rush of blood to his

face. “I, uh – that would be t-telling.” He smiles tentatively, like he’s unsure of his own joke.

Toru huffs, elbows flapping by her sides as she tries and fails to cross her bound arms. “Fine then,” she pouts. “Keep your secrets.”

Hanta slides into the only unclaimed seat in 1-A. Bakugou, assuming Hanta is here for him, starts up with all the feral snarling that the class knows and loves him for – well, the jury is out on whether anyone other than Kirishima actually loves the guy, but the rest of them know and tolerate him, at least. Hanta, in a show of peak tolerance, ignores Bakugou entirely, pivoting in the chair to face Midoriya, instead. Midoriya stares back at him, eyes occasionally drifting over Hanta’s shoulder to Bakugou, who’s foaming at the mouth or something, by the sound of it. Hanta continues to ignore him.

“Midoriya,” Hanta begins seriously, “I’ve been letting you settle in and stuff, but I feel like I’ve waited long enough. I have to ask. It’s time.” Hanta lets the words sit in the air, only to end up feeling a little guilty for his melodramatics when Midoriya goes still, eyes locking on the air next to Hanta’s head, focused on nothing at all. Hanta clears his throat. “So tell me – did you really hit Todoroki in the head with a stick?”

Midoriya blinks.

“It was a staff,” Todoroki corrects flatly. Todoroki, ice prince that he is, doesn’t seem to care about what’s being discussed in the slightest, which is why Hanta didn’t hesitate to ask right in front of him.

“I would like to shake your hand,” Hanta says, nodding earnestly and reaching over Midoriya’s desk in offering.

“What?”

“You did me a public service,” Hanta insists, wiggling his fingers. “It would be an honor to shake your hand, sir.” When Midoriya hesitantly grasps Hanta’s hand, Hanta immediately clasps it between both of his own, pumping his arm exuberantly. “Thank you, thank you, truly.”

“He gave me a concussion,” Todoroki says. Hanta gives Midoriya’s hand an extra firm shake as an added reward.

“S-sorry,” Midoriya says, helplessly looking back at Todoroki.

“Don’t be. *He* gave *me* frostbite.” Hanta playfully sticks his tongue out at Todoroki to make it clear that he’s joking, not wanting to actually hurt the guy’s feelings. Assuming he has them. Which he must, right? He’s just a little repressed or whatever.

Todoroki frowns mildly. “No, I didn’t,” he says. There’s no heat to the refutation, only a bland, factual type of confusion. Hanta makes an impromptu mental list and checks *confusion* off it – that’s definitely a feeling, right there.

“Next time you want to brain someone,” he tells Midoriya, “let me watch. Especially if it’s Todoroki. Or Bakugou.”

Behind Hanta, Bakugou starts hissing and spitting again. Considering his job well done, Hanta grins, finally releasing Midoriya’s hand.

Mido is super graceful when he’s fighting! Mina wouldn’t have guessed it because, to be honest, the boy’s a little clumsy-gawky in class and stuff. But it’s actually really fun to watch him fight and even more fun to fight with him! He’s got a smooth way of moving, weaving and spinning around his opponent as he dodges attacks and slides into openings. He doesn’t use his quirk much, either, Mina notices. Just his body! Mido’s fighting style is fluid and deceptively wild for how controlled Mina knows it must be, unpredictable to be on the other side of, despite the perfect flow of action. Like a well-choreographed dance!

Mina is already thinking about dance when Mido grabs her by the wrist, swings her out of his space, the powerful SNAP travelling from his arm to hers. He lets her go at the peak of their momentum – which is terrible etiquette from a dance partner, by the way – sending Mina stumbling a few steps away as she tries to keep her feet. She recovers, spinning back to face him with an eager grin. Mido smiles back, bright and toothy, with none of his normal faltering nerves.

“Dance with me!” Mina demands, bouncing back towards him.

“What?” he asks, smile replaced with amused confusion as he ducks around her outstretched arm, circling around behind her as she tries to keep pace, their movements syncing up.

“Yeah! Just like this!” she confirms, focusing on her footwork as she whirls around. Mido catches her arm under the elbow, spinning her around again, so fast that she would have gotten dizzy if she didn’t know how to spot.

“We’re sparring,” he tells her, clearly bemused, “not dancing.”

Mina laughs, “Same difference!”

Mido laughs too, and this time, when Mina stretches a hand towards him, he grabs it, lifts their arms over their heads, and twirls her. She squeaks around her giggles when he dips her next, clutching his arm for a moment before surrendering to the tide of the dance. The only warning she gets is a change in his smile – not the anxious one from class, not the adrenaline-high one from fighting, but something sharper, devious in a way Mina wouldn’t have expected.

He drops her. Just like that, WHAM, Mina’s on the ground.

“Bad dancing!” she squawks, kicking at his ankles.

“Good sparring,” he counters. His smirk is unrepentant and uncharacteristic, but as Mina throws herself at his shins in an attempt to tackle him to the ground, she thinks Mido could stand to wear a look like that more often.

“I’m just not suited for leadership,” Momo says, waving a dismissive hand and trying not to hurry the words out too obviously. She’s not sure how they landed on this subject, but she would certainly like to leave it far behind, especially when Izuku is frowning at her with none of the normal flighty avoidance of his eyes.

“You’re class president,” he points out. Momo shrugs. If her mother could see her, she would be scolded for resorting to such an uncouth gesture, but Izuku doesn’t care about those things and Momo isn’t sure what else to do. “That makes you a leader,” Izuku continues, slowly enough that Momo has to repress a fidget under the pressure of his

words.

“Yes,” Momo confirms haltingly, “but… the vote was done at the very beginning of the year. No one knew anyone else, then. Really, whoever voted for me probably only did it because I placed first in the quirk apprehension test.”

Izuku nods and, for a foolish instant, Momo thinks he’ll drop the subject. Instead, he says, “You placed first because of your skill, knowledge, and creative thinking. Those are great qualities for a leader to have.”

“Iida does a lot of the work,” Momo refutes without meeting Izuku’s eyes, a counter argument that wilts in on itself. She doesn’t know how Izuku can call her a leader when she can’t even stand to properly assert her own opinion on the matter.

“Of course he does, he’s the vice president. Even leaders aren’t meant to do everything alone.”

“It’s still only first year,” she says, forcing herself to laugh. “They’ll probably chose someone else next year.”

“I’ll vote for you.”

It’s probably cruel of her, but Momo wishes Izuku would stutter. He struggles so much with speaking evenly, and Momo knows that his stutter gets better or worse depending on how he is feeling. Truly, she’s a terrible friend to wish discomfort or anxiety on him, especially when he has been doing so much better the last couple of days, but she can’t stand how *sure* he sounds, in this moment.

“Well, that’s – you – I–”

“You’re my f-friend, right?” he interrupts. Wish fulfilled, Momo’s heart twists. She hates that *friend* is where the doubt begins.

“Of course,” she tells him, as sincerely as she can, so he will hopefully never feel like he needs to ask again.

“Then you can’t in-insult yourself. That’s my friend you’re talking about.”

With his shoulders straight and his head held high, Izuku’s smile looks like a challenge, a dare. And even though some shriveled part of her is still cringing away from everything he has said, Momo smiles back

and admits defeat. They *are* friends after all. It won't do for Momo to question her friend's judgement so harshly.

Coming back to himself feels a bit like turning dials on a radio, trying to zero-in on a distant signal. His entire body feels fuzzy-tingly, like static – except for his head, which he can hardly feel at all. He runs a numb tongue over his teeth, carefully keeping it behind them so he doesn't bite it on accident. His mouth tastes like a fried electrical outlet. Damn if that's not a metaphor for his entire life.

Classes are… basically over, Denki realizes.

God, it was bad this time, huh? Looks like he lost the entire second half of his day. Usually, he's only out of commission for about an hour, and that's already long enough to suck major balls. And oh man – he's got a test coming up. His grades are piss poor even without his brain playing hooky for half his classes. He really didn't need any extra assistance on the being-a-failure front.

Alright, damage control time. Kirishima will definitely lend Denki his notes. Of course, Kirishima doesn't really do all that much better than Denki, but anything is better than nothing. Or maybe Jirou would do him a favor. She's pretty smart. Not the nicest, though, especially to Denki, even if they're still kind of friends. She'd probably help him out, but he doubts she'd do it quietly.

It's a cursed game of Would You Rather. Would Denki rather face Jirou's ridicule for going idiot mode, or his father's for yet another failing grade?

Oh, who's he kidding? He's going to do everything he can to pass – hello, mockery – and he's still not going to – goodbye, parental pride.

Denki's head thumps heavily against his desk. Whoops, there goes two more braincells. Probably should have thought that through; he really doesn't have any to spare. Then again, thinking's not his specialty, that's the whole problem.

He laughs quietly against the laminated wood surface of his desk. Hey, at least he'll be able to have a sense of humor about it when he flunks out of school. That has to be worth something, right? Sometimes you

either laugh or you cry, and Denki knows which he prefers. A real riot, Denki is. Thank you, thank you, he'll be here all week. And probably not all that much longer, the way his academics are trending.

"Um, K-Kaminari?" Denki looks up to find Midoriya standing near his desk, a couple awkward steps too far away to say he's really next to it. Denki props his cheek up in his palm and smiles, lazy and slightly dazed.

"Hey, Mido. What can I do for ya on this fine afternoon?" His words slur together just slightly, indistinct around the edges, and Denki forces himself to keep smiling as if he doesn't even notice.

"Are you alright?"

"Me? Oh, I'm great. Just still a lil *buzzed*, yaknow?" Sense of humor coming in clutch, again. Denki laughs at his own joke. Mido doesn't, frowning slightly and rocking on his heels. He looks concerned, actually, which is really just – not very cash money of him, because Denki is hilarious.

"Well, I just – do you need n-notes or s-something? I, um, I take pretty g-good ones, I th-think, and you can c-copy them, if you w-want. Or not. K-Katsuki's are probably better–"

"Wait, Bakugou? Yeah, the guy's notes're insane, but so's *he*. He never lets people borrow that shit. I'll take literally anything I can get, my dude."

"Oh. You can – you can g-get mine, then."

Mido passes Denki a notebook, a bright green sticky note already poking out from the relevant pages. From the look of it, Mido's notes are nearly as insane as Bakugou's. Maybe even good enough to do someone like Denki some good, huh? That'll be the day.

"Hey Deku!" Ochako cheers, pressing her palms against the top of his desk and leaning her weight on them. Midoriya freezes half-way through turning his attention to her, expression sticking in place with his eyes, unblinking, still a few inches to Ochako's right.

“Uraraka,” Tsu says, her tone gently scolding as she comes to stand by Ochako’s side. Ochako frowns, looking from Tsu, who shakes her head slightly, to Midoriya, who is stiff as a board.

“What did I do?” she asks, a seed of distress beginning to sprout inside her. Obviously, she has done *something* to make Midoriya uncomfortable, otherwise he wouldn’t be all locked up like that, and Tsu wouldn’t be chastising her, but Ochako didn’t *mean* to do any harm, and isn’t quite sure what misstep she made.

“That’s not his name,” Tsu explains.

“Yeah, but it’s a cute nickname, isn’t it? Like *you can do it!* You know?” she asks, knowing now that Deku is wrong, but not knowing *how*. She needs to understand the mistake she’s made if she’s going to avoid making it again. Midoriya blinks, startled back to himself.

“Bakugou doesn’t give cute nicknames,” Tsu points out.

Ochako considers that. Finally, Midoriya meets her eyes, and she sees her own confusion reflected back at her. Grimacing slightly, she remembers *Round Face*, the way Bakugou always makes her want to cup her cheeks between her hands and hide her face.

“It means useless,” Midoriya says, voice flat and blank. “Worthless.”

Ochako slaps her hands over her mouth. Oh. Oh no. Suddenly, she is more self-conscious about her thoughtless words than she ever has been about the way she looks. She imagines Bakugou calling her – a coward or a disappointment or something like that, and feels tears burn behind her eyes for having participated in that kind of mean-spirited nastiness.

“I’m sorry!” she blurts between her fingers. Midoriya looks away from her, smiling hesitant and fragile into the space over her shoulder.

“It’s f-fine,” he says. Ochako shakes her head staunchly, but doesn’t interrupt as he continues, “It’s not like you, uh… meant it th-that w-way.”

“Of course not!” Ochako vows. “I’ll never do it again, Midoriya!”

“You can – you can just c-call me Izuku,” Midoriya says.

Ochako is surprised, and she’s sure it shows on her face, but she resolves herself, bobbing her head determinedly. She might make

mistakes, more often than she wishes, but she won't make the same one twice. From now on, she'll call Izuku exactly what he wants to be called and nothing else. And she'll never take her cues from Bakugou again – that's for sure.

When Eijiro manages to catch Midoriya alone, he drops into a bow, heart pounding a conflicted rhythm behind his ribs.

"I'm sorry for Bakugou," he says, straightening up a moment later. Midoriya stares at him, startled and not nearly as angry as he has the right to be.

"For… Bakugou?" Midoriya echoes, face scrunching up.

"Yeah. It's hard not to notice how nasty he is to you. Nastier than usual."

Eijiro frowns, teeth nicking the inside of his lip as his mouth twists. Bakugou oscillates between ignoring Midoriya, screaming at or about him, and seeming to wish death on the guy with his eyes. Bakugou's always meaner than he should be, but he's actually been getting better about a lot of stuff. Except for Midoriya, that is. It makes Eijiro's chest ache to acknowledge just how terrible Bakugou can be, but that's all the more reason to dive into the issue head on, like a man.

"I'm still going to be his friend," Eijiro admits. Despite everything, Bakugou is Eijiro's best bro now, and Eijiro's not going to abandon him. "I want to be friends with you, too, but I understand if you don't want to." Eijiro thinks he's a pretty friendly guy, but even he never would have made nice with someone who hung around with one of his bullies.

Midoriya, however, doesn't seem upset in the slightest. "I don't *w-want* you to stop being f-friend with Katsuki. But he – he won't be h-happy if you spend much time with m-me."

"I don't care!" Eijiro states without hesitation. He definitely wants Bakugou to be happy, sure, but if he gets mad over Eijiro liking Midoriya, that's his own problem. "Bakugou is my bro, but that doesn't mean he's in charge of me. He'll get over it."

Midoriya smiles, slightly wistful in a way that makes Eijiro feel like he's missed something. He feels that way too often when it comes to Bakugou and Midoriya's relationship.

"You're a n-nice guy, Kirishima," Midoriya says. "Katsuki could use a friend like you. Take c-care of him, alright?"

Eijiro doesn't really understand why Midoriya would make a request like that, and he doesn't understand the sadness that suffuses the words. It's important though, he can tell that much, even without know the whys of it. Eijiro stands straighter, nodding as solemnly as he can.

"Leave it to me!"

"Do you have a name?" Izuku asks. "Other than Dark Shadow, that is."

"Kasumi!" Dark Shadow, only recently dubbed Kasumi, crows eagerly.

While Kasumi practically vibrates with excitement, Fumikage has tensed, muscles drawing taut and feathers pricking along his neck. His skin crawls like sin.

No one has ever asked Kasumi if she has a name. When Fumikage first heard her, four years old and criminally oblivious, their parents and doctors had called her Dark Shadow, the closest thing to a name she ever had. Always, though, Dark Shadow was more *what* she was than *who*. No one ever thought to name her as anything more than a *thing*, not even Fumikage, who has been sharing his body with her for their entire lives, his mind for nearly as long. He was the person in the best position to understand and appreciate her, yet he squandered every human moment between them. He has failed her so entirely.

"That's an excellent name, Kasumi," Izuku praises.

She puffs up with pride. "I'm very good with names."

She did not come up with Kasumi herself, but Fumikage doesn't point that out. He will not take anything more from her. Their parents, devastated and remorseful, had chosen the name – had chosen it years

ago, before they knew if Fumikage himself would be a boy or a girl.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Kasumi asks, creeping closer to Izuku, edging up his arm, speaking not half as softly as she likely thinks she is.

Izuku glances past her, looking to Fumikage. There is something knowing in his eyes. Fumikage feels the visceral urge to flee before it, to hole himself up in the dark and utter a million more apologies to *Kasumi*, who doesn’t even understand how badly she has been wronged. Instead, he nods jerkily, silently giving his approval for Izuku to hear whatever Kasumi has to say. It’s not within Fumikage’s rights to stop her – it never truly had been, and he has years to make up for.

“I’m not a quirk,” she tells Izuku when she has his full attention. “I’m a real girl.”

“We’re twins,” Fumikage elaborates, mouth dry, words like rocks over his sandpaper tongue. He works hard to keep his shame from his voice, lest Kasumi think it’s *her* Fumikage ashamed of, rather than himself.

Izuku feigns surprise to satisfy Kasumi’s dramatics, but to Fumikage, it’s immediately obvious that there is nothing genuine about his reaction. Somehow, Izuku already knew of, or at least suspected, the darkness that lay at the heart of the Tokoyami family, the secret so deep that not even they had realized.

This is more information that Fumikage isn’t sure what to do with. Confusion, certainly, would be a valid response. How was Izuku to know what Fumikage himself had failed to properly notice and address for so long? Perhaps there is even a place for anger. After all, Izuku had somehow come to know life changing and personal information before Fumikage was ready for him to know – possibly before Fumikage even knew himself.

As Kasumi preens and trills, Fumikage chooses to be grateful. It settles like a dense stone in his stomach. Hows and whats and whys aren’t a fraction as important as the *whos*, and Izuku has never failed to treat Kasumi well. Even barely knowing her, he has never once seemed to question her personhood. Fumikage could learn from him.

Shouto stands in front of Midoriya, feet shoulder width apart and arms stiff by his sides. To say Midoriya looks at Shouto would be generous. His eyes dart about, settling on Shouto's forehead only for a few second at a time before flickering away again. Midoriya, like Shouto, doesn't seem to know what to do with his arms, fidgeting, folding them behind him, mussing up his hair, tugging at his uniform.

"C-can I h-help you?" Midoriya asks after a long moment, voice squeaking.

"You have a fire quirk."

"…Yes?"

"So do I."

Like fire, the words burn and bubble in Shouto's throat, scorching the roof of his mouth. The admission catches Midoriya's interest, though. He stands straighter, restless movements ceasing as he looks Shouto over with an assessing gaze.

"You have an extreme temperature manipulation quirk," Midoriya corrects. "Your fire and ice aren't two distinct things."

"I can't control the fire," Shouto grits, forcing himself not to get sidetracked by Midoriya's statements. As unassuming as he is, Midoriya has a way of casually saying things with implications that, if true, would redefine Shouto's entire life. Shouto is not here for a new existential crisis. He is here to deal with the one Midoriya already caused.

"You can learn," Midoriya assures. He rubs a hand over his mouth. "I doubt you could control the ice at first, either. Though it will be harder, now. Quirks tend to strengthen as we grow older, but even moderate use can ensure that a person's control keeps pace with their inherent strength. *Without* that use… After repressing it for so long, you'll likely have to not only learn control, but also overcome a deeply internalized dysregulation. It can definitely be done, but it'll be an uphill battle. I wonder if Shinsou could…"

Shouto waits for Midoriya to finish, growing increasingly impatient as the boy trails into mumbling tangents that have nothing to do with Shouto's goals.

“Teach me,” Shouto interrupts. Midoriya exhales sharply as his rambling comes to an abrupt halt. “Even if I never use it, I need to be able to control it. So teach me.”

“Me?”

“It’s you or Endeavor.”

With internship forms due the next day, Shouto had been spurred into action. Going to his old man was the last thing Shouto wanted, but he would if that’s what it took. He has no desire to *use* his fire, the thought still revolts him, but he can’t continue to ignore it, after everything that’s happened. He refuses to allow other people to be harmed because of his negligent, *arrogant* lack of control – he refuses to be like his father in that way, even if it means using the man’s power.

“Well,” Midoriya says, “I guess it’ll have to be me, then.”

Relief is a cool balm on the blistering heat of Shouto’s insides. Stilted, after too long a pause to be polite, he says, “Thank you, Midoriya.”

“Call me Izuku.”

Shouto blinks. “Oh. Alright.” He stares at Midoriya, making direct eye contact for longer than they ever have before. Shouto wonders if he should go, now. He adds, “Call me Shouto.”

Midoriya blinks. “Oh. Alright.”

Mezo knows what it looks like when someone is afraid of him. He can even identify the various different kinds of fear. The woman at the supermarket over the weekend was afraid he would attack her. The child on the street this morning was afraid because Mezo looked different than everyone else. His father had been afraid of the secrets that Mezo might have learned.

Izuku – and Mezo will call him Izuku, because that is how he introduced himself – falls into a similar category as Mezo’s father. He manages the fear fairly well. Occasionally, he will flinch away from Mezo, send careful looks from the corner of his eyes. Izuku diligently

avoids Mezo whenever possible. Mezo does what he can to make it possible more often than not.

None of Izuku's dismay is reciprocated by Mezo, but Mezo, so familiar with so many varieties of fear, will never intentionally force his presence on someone who doesn't want it. Izuku's fear would only grow worse if cornered. Considering Mezo's suspicions about where the feeling stems from, he doubts Izuku would appreciate any form of public confrontation, either.

So Mezo does his best to be nonthreatening, but otherwise leaves the issue alone.

This works for only a few days until they are paired together for a rescue simulation. Izuku handles the situation as well as a frayed rope takes weight. Which is to say, well enough for a moment, but not sustainably, only unpredictable moments from snapping.

Carefully, Mezo begins, "If this is about what happened before the awards ceremony–"

"N-nothing happened," Izuku interrupts. "Katsuki d-doesn't know what he's t-talking ab-bout. He was s-saying all s-sorts of s-st-stuff. N-none of it m-meant a-anyth-thing."

"No, it didn't" Mezo agrees, voice perfectly level in contrast to Izuku's thin and fractured deflections. "I hear things I'm not meant to all the time. You quickly realize that most of it doesn't mean anything, not without context. You can't deduce an entire story from a single sentence." Mezo takes a breath, looking away from Izuku, who's statue-stricken and beginning to crack beneath the pressure of Mezo's stare. "If I learn your story, it will be from you. Anything else is meaningless."

There is a long pause, and Mezo is content to let it be, just as he has with Izuku's avoidance up to this point.

Softly, Izuku breaks the silence, "Th-thank you."

"I'm s-sorry about what happened to your br-brother."

The corner of Tenya's notebook crumples, his hands jerking as he tries to slot the book between the others in his bag. He recovers smoothly, pretending the muscle spasm didn't happen, plastering a mild smile over his face when he turns to face Midoriya. Strength and optimism in the face of grief, he tells himself. That's what everyone wants to see, he just needs to fake it well enough.

"Thank you," he says graciously. "We're just grateful he's alive."

Of course, Tensei will never be the same. In some way, he really did die, regardless of the all the monitors that beep around him in time with his heartbeat. His life is over, and what is death if not the end of life? Survival looked like a cruel parody of life when the doctors said he would never walk again.

Hefting his bag over his shoulder, Tenya makes to leave, but Midoriya speaks again, "Don't do it."

"Do what?" Tenya asks, cocking his head. Midoriya meets his eyes too intensely. Tenya reinforces his look of stern confusion, refusing to allow himself to bristle beneath the knowing glint in Midoriya's eyes.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing. Don't."

Tenya's temper flares, newly volatile in this last week. There is so much in the world to be outraged at, and at the moment, Midoriya finds himself at the top of Tenya's list. Daring to look knowing, speaking like a warning, an omen. Of course Midoriya would try to stand in the way of justice. He was a villain, after all.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Tenya says, glad Uraraka has already gone home. She wouldn't have liked his tone.

"I have a brother, too, you know," Midoriya says. Tenya didn't ask and doesn't care. He bites hard on his tongue to stop himself from snapping as much. A copper tang fills his mouth. "I – I do g-get it. I would do nearly a-anything for him. I h-h-have." Midoriya takes a deep breath, looking away from Tenya to stare hard at the wall, jaw working silently. When he continues, he doesn't stutter. "Which is why I can tell you there's no coming back from something like that. You have people you can rely on, Iida. You don't need to be the one to take care of it. I'm pretty sure your brother won't be any more grateful than mine was."

Midoriya has the gall to smile. A wry quirk to his lips, like he is making a *joke*, like he is trying to establish some kind of camaraderie

with Tenya. Trying to bond over family, as if the two of them are anything alike. Tenya raises his chin, staring glacially down at Midoriya.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Déjà vu.

A perfect example of the beautiful versatility of the French language, a simple phrase for such a complex but universal sensation.

There is still at least an hour left in today’s heroics lesson, but Yuga has already been lost to the swell of *déjà vu* and misery. His stomach writhes like a beast with claws, pulling, tearing, rending in several directions like tissue paper in careless hands. Maybe it’s his theatrical nature speaking, but every time this happens, Yuga wonders how he survives it. Surely, it feels like his insides will never be the same again, like they must have been reduced to a raw and bloody pulp under his skin.

Of course, he will survive, and he will feel quite foolish for it. Foolish for allowing this to happen, foolish for being incapacitated by it. They are in the middle of an exercise, and he has a role to play, his team is relying on him – but perhaps it was foolish of them to have placed any faith in him. It’s hardly as if this embarrassment is an unusual occurrence.

Yuga sees Recovery Girl often enough that he can perfectly picture the way her lips will flatten with unimpressed discontent when he staggers through the infirmary doors. Alas, he is infirm. Infirm, inferior, inflicting himself with an influx of infinite inferno-fire pain, earning infernal infamy between the infirmary walls.

The ground swims in front of his eyes, little rainbow sparks dancing over the concrete. Perhaps he has become slightly delusional, as well. Pain has always unmade him – a horrible weakness for a hero, Yuga knows.

“Oh, Aoyama.”

Déjà vu.

Izuku, with a hazy aura of colors smeared around his edges, is too bright to look at. He always shines, but he seems especially brilliant when Yuga is at his most dim. Izuku is on the opposite team, but Izuku, pillar of virtue that he is, never places competition before compassion.

“Backlash?” he asks softly. With guiding motions from gentle hands, he eases them both to the ground. He is already familiar with this version of Yuga, stripped of pretense and flayed of glamour.

Yuga wonders if Izuku feels the echo of their first meeting in this moment as strongly as Yuga does.

“It’s alright,” Izuku says, voice thick with pity or sympathy – Yuga can’t discern which. “I can – I’ll just…”

A hand cups the back of Yuga’s neck, a cold shock grounding him against the live embers rolling up and down his spine. The relief is as potent as Yuga remembers, cascading through him, leaving only mild aches and aftershock tremors in its wake. It’s better than Recovery Girl’s healing, even, which leaves Yuga feeling exhausted and wrung out, a hollow version of his usual self.

Izuku, despite generously gifting Yuga with reprieve, clearly doesn’t share Yuga’s new peace of mind. The terror in him is frightfully obvious, his face wane, eyes glassy like the windows of an abandoned home. Izuku has been so careful, Yuga knows, so withholding, but of course that self-preserving caution collapses at the first opportunity he has to be helpful.

Yuga grabs Izuku’s hand, clasping it tightly before the other can pull it away from his neck. Izuku’s palm is calmy with a cold sweat, and Yuga couldn’t possibly say which of them it belonged to you.

“I won’t ask,” Yuga assures him, voice slightly hoarse from the ordeal. “I will just say thank you, *mon amie*. For this time, and the last.”

“Izuku,” Tsu says to catch his attention over the background bustle of the class. “I tend to say whatever I’m thinking.”

He smiles slightly, nods. “I kn-know you do, Tsu.”

“I’ve been wanting to say some things, but I didn’t want to disturb you when you first joined the class. Can I say them now?”

Normally, Tsu wouldn’t ask, even if it meant someone being unhappy with her, but it has only been a little over a week, and she still frequently sees Izuku overwhelmed, notices the way his eyes and smile go slightly vacant as he is triggered into distancing himself from his surroundings. He looks at her, apprehension lighting in his eyes, then dimming into something heavy and sober.

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” Tsu says, after a moment’s thought to determine where best to begin. The tension around Izuku wavers, a bewildered divot forming between his eyebrows.

“Me? For what?”

“You saved my life.”

“He did?” Uraraka asks, looking to Tsu in surprise.

“Man, I knew Midobro was manly,” Kirishima says.

The class listens intently. This is the first time any of them have brought up Izuku’s history with their class, explicitly and to his face. They have all been waiting for this moment, and curiosity had been creeping closer to its boiling point every day. Patience was a rare and limited resource in 1-A.

Tsu keeps her focus on Izuku, ignoring the attentive eyes around them. The dimple on Izuku’s forehead deepens. The consternation on his face is almost comical, especially with the asymmetry of his eyebrows, but Tsu refrains from speaking that particular thought out loud.

“I didn’t do anything,” he argues.

“That man, Shigaraki, he could turn things to ash with his hands. He was hardly an inch away from grabbing my face when you stopped him.”

“What?” Uraraka gasps. “Tsu, you never said anything about that!”

It’s true; Tsu has mostly tried to forget the helpless horror of the whole situation, comforting herself with her survival and refusing to

be haunted by what ifs. She has no desire to linger on what could have been. All that matters is what *is* – she is alive, and Izuku is the one who saved her, whether that was his intention or not.

Tsu watches him withdraw, a rapid shift that leaves him feeling much farther away than he physically is. He retreats into himself without moving at all; the only change is something intangible in his eyes.

Maybe Tsu should have waited longer to bring it up. Maybe she never should have gotten so detailed. She remembers the way Izuku had been crying, the way Shigaraki had called him *Rogue*, the familiar way they had spoken to each other. There's history there, and of course it would still be sensitive. It hasn't even been a month.

Everything has happened so quickly.

"You shouldn't thank me for that," Izuku tells her, nearly a whisper.

Tsu hesitates but shakes her head. "I'm glad you were there," she insists. "I think it would have been worse if you hadn't been. Thank you, Izuku."

I'm glad you were there.

I'm glad you were there and an audience of idiots, listening with bated breath as a villain is declared a hero.

I'm glad you were there.

Katsuki wasn't glad.

When he saw Deku at the USJ, Katsuki had thought that he was dead. He had thought he was in fucking hell. If souls existed, Katsuki's had screamed in the face of perpetual torment, that's how *in hell* he had thought he was. His own personal demon, there to torture him, punish him, *ruin him*.

Deku ruined everything. He ruined Katsuki.

Of course he did, he was a goddamned villain.

Katsuki *needs* him to be the villain. Because Katsuki is going to be a hero. Everyone knows that the hero always wins. If Deku is the villain and Katsuki is the hero, then everything is going to be fine. If Deku's not the villain, then –

What does Katsuki punch? How does he win?

If Deku's not the villain, then what are Katsuki's nightmares about? And how does he stop having them? When will things be fine again?

Do you ever feel like you're already dead? Or maybe like you were never alive to begin with. Katsuki doesn't know if he has a pulse.

He thinks this might be hell. It feels like Deku has damned him. It feels like Deku is climbing over him, rising higher as he drags Katsuki deeper. It feels *wrong*. It tastes like ash and copper, a single warbling, high-pitched note. Everyone stares at him, but their faces all look warped, like plastic, like they're not human. They stare at him like he's not human.

Katsuki realizes he has been speaking. He hasn't heard a word of what he's said.

Hobo-Sensei is a dark silhouette in the doorway, with hellfire in his eyes.

Katsuki thinks he must be in hell.

Chapter End Notes

> Dark Shadow's name, Kasumi, means mist. At least, according to my very shallow dive through google. That said, I am NOT good at naming characters, especially in a language that is not my own. I debated giving her a name at all, just because I don't usually like to edit canon characters to that degree? But I think it would

be pretty shitty to acknowledge that she is her own person without addressing the name issue. Man, I don't know why I feel the need to offer a million justifications for this, damn. Me @ me chill tf out bro

Yaoyorozu: *eats lunch with Izuku*
Yaoyorozu: *calls him by his first name*
Yaoyorozu: *is excited that Izuku also likes classical music*
Jirou: This is FINE.

Izuku: I don't dance
Mina: I know you can!!

Izuku: Take it from me – you don't want to be a train.
Iida: What the *hell* does that even mean?

Me: I don't really care about this character
Me: *writes a single scene from their perspective*
Me: I've only had them for 400 words, but if anything happened to them, I would kill everyone in this room and then myself.

Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part VII
Update: Jul 29

Brainwashing - Part VII

Chapter Notes

> Motivation this week go *whistles like a cartoon anvil being dropped from a very high place*
>
> Art from L inspired by a Dissociated Izuku!
>
> Lark: X
> Rhino: X
> Sits: X
> Snowy: X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta leaves the class alone for fifteen minutes.

It's fine – it should be fine. He does it all the time. They're big boys and girls, and Vlad is right next door in case they get up to anything they really shouldn't. Shouta can take fifteen minutes out of their study period to discuss the upcoming internships with Nedzu without the world ending.

A monitor beeps.

Nedzu's computer makes any variety of noises. Shouta has learned to just ignore the whistles and chimes, same as Nedzu does. This particular tone catches the rat's attention, and he spins away from Shouta midsentence to click around, faster than Shouta can register, until tinny audio fills the room.

"*Don't* talk about my mother," Izuku says. Shouta's spine straightens, a rigid line of steel to match the unyielding harshness of Izuku's voice.

"About what?" Bakugou's voice, but uncanny. It's dull and level, hardly rising with his question. "About how she lied for years?"

Shouta meets Nedzu's eyes. Something is wrong with Bakugou. Something is wrong. It's a rare occasion – and not a desired one – where the rat stops smiling. Now, the black specs of his eyes are no longer glinting or mischievous. He looks grim.

Reaching over the desk between them, Shouta grabs Nedzu by the collar of his suit, tugging him out of his seat and dumping him

unceremoniously in the loops of Shouta's capture weapon. Normally, Nedzu hates being manhandled – hates anyone who has the audacity to treat him like an animal – and normally, Shouta respects that. But at the moment, *something is wrong*, and Nedzu doesn't offer a single complaint as Shouta rushes out of the room.

Forty-three seconds after Nedzu's monitor beeped, Shouta pulls the door to his classroom open.

"You're all idiots if you think this will end well," Bakugou says.

The funny thing is, he sounds almost reasonable. His voice conveys obvious disdain and frustration, but he speaks slowly; he doesn't yell.

Still, the room is so silent you could hear a pin drop. Shouta doesn't think he's ever seen a hero class this quiet. Their faces are pale or slightly green, slack or confused or horrified. Izuku and Bakugou stare at one another, Izuku's blank expression clearly visible from where Shouta has frozen. Bakugou's hands are a bloodless white, fisted tightly around the back of his chair. He turns away from Izuku, back to the front of the classroom, stare landing on Shouta. His face is just as blank as Izuku's.

Disturbingly, Shouta wants to shake him. He wants to grab Bakugou by the shoulders, haul him out of his seat, and jostle him back and forth until that empty look rattles off his face. Shouta's fingers dig into the wood of the door frame, splinters pricking at the soft flesh beneath his fingernails. In all his years of teaching, he has *never* been this angry with a student.

The top of Nedzu's skull collides roughly with Shouta's chin as the rat pops out of Shouta's capture weapon. Shouta certainly would have bitten his tongue, if his jaw weren't already shut as tightly as a steel trap.

"It's me!" Nedzu cries out. "The principal!" He speaks with his usual jaunty cheer, but Shouta can hear the strain in his tone. The words seem to travel slowly through the thick tension of the classroom, taking several seconds to reach the students' ears. They look on uneasily.

"Bakugou," Shouta growls, surprised at the gravel of his own voice.

Bakugou blinks – once, slowly and slightly out of sync, twice. His mouth twitches. An explosion pops in palm, barely anything more than a wisp of smoke that Shouta snuffs out immediately with Erasure.

Staring at his own hand, Bakugou's eyes widen abruptly, lips curling back over his teeth in a snarl.

"Bakugou!" Shouta shouts, just as Bakugou begins to turn back to Izuku, a harsh, unformed syllable already spilling out of his mouth. "Out!"

"Huh?!"

"We need to talk."

Nedzu pats a small paw against Shouta's cheek. Shouta flinches away from the unexpected gesture. Unraveling part of Shouta's capture weapon from around his neck, Nedzu uses the length to rappel to the floor.

"Let me take this, Shouta," he says, smiling in a way that shows the tiny points of his teeth. "I think Bakugou and I are overdue for a conversation. How about you handle things here?"

A vicious part of Shouta wants to protest. He's tired of Bakugou. Tired of all his bullshit and the way he keeps, *keeps relentlessly*, dragging Izuku down into whatever mire his head is stuck in. Tired of his stubborn refusal to face, to even acknowledge, his actual problems, to learn and grow from them.

Sure, yes, Bakugou has been improving, Shouta can acknowledge that. The boy he met on the first day of school *never* would have voluntarily started therapy, never would have requested help or even admitted that he needed it. Bakugou *is* growing, but to Shouta, here and now, that growth is not happening fast enough. He wants to give Bakugou a piece of his goddamned mind. Maybe then the urgency of this shit would finally sink through the kid's thick skull.

Of course, all these reasons Shouta wants to protest are also reasons that Nedzu should be the one to handle to boy. Shouta is biased, and emotionally compromised, and – at the moment – incredibly tightly wound. And Bakugou is unstable, only finally trying to heal, and – at the moment – floundering desperately.

Shouta releases his quirk and nods tightly to approve Nedzu's suggested plan.

"Come with me, Bakugou," Nedzu says, pushing against Shouta's shin until Shouta gets the hint and steps out of the door. Bakugou wobbles subtly on his feet when he stands and crosses the room. "Do you like

tea?" Nedzu asks as they go on their way.

1-A is still silent. Shouta takes advantage of the moment, the calm before the storm, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. He doesn't know the whole of what Bakugou said, but he has his suspicions.

A voice breaks the silence, "There, there, Izuku. It's alright."

Shouta opens his eyes. Dark Shadow clumsily patting Izuku on the arm, making an odd cooing noise. Izuku looks at her, still forebodingly expressionless. Tokoyami watches with the feather of his head fluffed out, spikier than Shouta has ever seen them.

"You can steal me if you want to. I wouldn't even mind, you're nice and I like you!"

Shouta's breath turns to lead, lungs petrifying and shriveling in his chest. He suspected, and now he knew. Little else would have reduced 1-A to this silent staring, lost and afraid and unsure of how afraid they ought to be to begin with.

"You're not a quirk," Tokoyami reminds Dark Shadow quietly, defusing any further attempts she might make at misguided comfort.

Feeling like he has cinderblocks tied around his ankles, Shouta steps forward, ignoring the students who track him with their eyes as he passes them. He kneels next to Izuku, his bad knee protesting against the tile floor as he grabs one of Izuku's hands out of his lap and squeezes it tightly.

"How are you feeling?" Shouta asks hoarsely. Izuku looks at him. The entire class looks at him. They're all silent. Shouta swallows painfully, clears his throat, and squeezes Izuku's hand again, repeating, "How are you feeling, Izuku?"

Izuku's fingers twitch in Shouta's grip.

"I – I'm feeling."

"Good," Shouta says.

He thinks about asking what happened, but the question sticks in his throat. Izuku still looks listless, but this time, when Shouta squeezes his hand, Izuku squeezes back. His grip is tight that the bones in Shouta's hands grind together. With small, jerky movements, Izuku glances around the room, avoiding looking directly at any of his

classmates, but inevitably noticing the way they are all watching him. Through their joined hands, Shouta can feel Izuku's fine, tense tremor.

"Can I–" his voice breaks, "C-can I g-go? I w-want to g-g-*go*."

Shouta stands, pulling Izuku to his feet at the same time. Izuku's hair flattens beneath Shouta's palm as he puts a hand on the kid's head, waiting for Izuku's eyes to stop darting frantically around his surroundings and focus on Shouta. With his heart in his throat and a sour taste on his tongue, Shouta wishes he could do more.

"You can go. I'll take care of this," Shouta assures, trying for the dry, factual confidence that he knows Izuku appreciates. Izuku nearly slumps with a desperate kind of relief, but he immediately goes jittery-taut again. Shouta pats the side of his head brusquely. "Go to the teachers' lounge. Not alone," he adds after a moment's thought. "Get Mic."

Izuku nods and leaves the room, just shy of a stumbling run.

Shouta closes his eyes again, takes a deep breath through his nose, allows himself to half-sit half-lean against the top of Izuku's desk. Fabric rustles as someone shifts. Shouta sighs.

"What did Bakugou say?"

More shuffling. Through cracked eyes, Shouta looks over his class. With a quick scan, he categorizes their reactions – shocked, confused, and horrified. Asui, Koda, Shoji, Tokoyami, Todoroki, and Yaoyorozu. Aoyama, Ashido, Kirishima, and Sato. Iida, Uraraka, Ojiro, Kaminari, Jirou, and Sero. The lot of them look between each other.

"Yaoyorozu," Shouta calls. She squeaks – soft, but he's close enough to hear it. "What did Bakugou say?"

She clears her throat, staring down at her hands on her desk, pressing her palms flat to the surface. "He – He told us about Izuku's quirk, sir."

"Don't call me sir. What about it?"

"About… about how Izuku stole Explosion, when they were young. Is it true, Sensei? Can Izuku really…" She trails off, mouth pursing into a wobbly, conflicted line.

"Can he really *steal* quirks?" Uraraka finishes.

“No way,” Kaminari says, thin and urgent. “That’s not possible! It’s – it’s not possible, right?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Jirou snaps. “Of course it’s not possible. Bakugou was making shit up.”

“Hey!” Kirishima protests, reanimating from his shocked state as he comes immediately to Bakugou’s defense. “Bakugou’s a lot of things, alright, but he’s not a liar!”

“So, it’s true,” Uraraka yelps.

“Sensei?” Yaoyorozu asks. Her stare, helplessly uncertain and concerned, itches against Shouta’s skin.

“It’s true,” Shouta confirms.

The outcry is panicked and confused in turns. Wondering how something like this could be true, wondering what it means that it is. For once, activating Erasure isn’t enough to silence them.

Shouta resorts to shouting, “It’s true, and it always has been. Get over it!”

A hush falls, startled eyes looking back to him. Several students have the gall to look hurt by the declaration. Shouta narrows his eyes.

“Nothing has changed,” he says. “You were fine with him this morning. You can be fine with him now.”

“We didn’t *know* this morning,” Ojiro counters.

“It’s so scary,” Uraraka adds, lower lip pinched between her teeth.

“Yeah,” Kaminari agrees, “What if he–”

Shouta’s temper snaps, more spectacularly than it ever has before.

“What if you killed a dozen people with a single shock?” he asks, voice as lethal as the hypothetical he proposes. Kaminari pales, shrinking back into his seat. “What if I snapped a man’s neck? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

From their uncomfortable, nearly fearful glances, Shouta doesn’t think they do. He hisses a frustrated sigh, pressing a hand over his forehead to massage his temples. Life lessons are always the hardest ones to teach, the most painful. He has never been particularly kind about

teaching necessarily lessons, though as on-edge as he is, he might be verging towards cruel, today. He tries to reign himself in, though he has no yardstick to measure his success.

“Let me make one thing very clear. *All* of you, all of *us*, are dangerous. We can all hurt people. Hurt them, kill them – *worse*. As heroes, we *weaponize* not only our quirks but our very *bodies*. Why don’t civilians fear us?” Silence. “Uraraka, tell me why.”

Uraraka gasps, looking to a stone-faced Iida for help and receiving nothing. “Um,” she stutters, “because we’re heroes, right? We’re there to help.”

“But we *could* hurt them. Strength is a double-edged sword. It can harm just as easily as it can protect. Easier, even. So how do they know that we’ll help them?” Shouta looks sternly around the class. “Don’t make me start calling more names,” he threatens when none of them seem willing to speak up.

“They don’t know,” Aoyama answers, lacking his typical flair. “They *trust* that heroes are on their side.”

“Yes. Heroes have the strength to harm people, and they make the *choice* to use it to help, instead. I made that choice. So did all of you. And so did *Izuku*. Everyone else has to trust in that choice.”

“Except he was a villain,” Iida interjects flatly. “He made the choice to hurt people, and then he changed his mind. He could change it back.”

“No,” Shouta snaps, anger flaring again. “*Other people* made the choice to hurt Izuku, and he made the choice to *help himself*. Knowing his quirk doesn’t tell you anything about what he has been through, and it’s frankly none of your business. He is not and never was a villain, and I don’t want to hear any of you saying as much again.”

Some of them have the grace to look chastised. Iida squares his jaw and glares at the floor. Kaminari’s head whips back and forth as he looks frantically between Sero and Kirishima, both thoughtful and reserved, for guidance. Visibly overwrought, he squirms in his seat.

“But – But what if–”

“Knock it off!”

This time, it’s not Shouta whose patience has worn thin. Yaoyorozu stands, a flush of red high on her cheeks as she breathes heavily. She

smooths her hair back with a shaky hand, jerking her chin high into the air as she glares at her classmates.

“That’s our friend you’re talking about! It doesn’t matter what he *could* do because he *won’t do it!* He’s been here a week and a half, and he’s been nothing but kind the entire time! Maybe you should be asking yourselves why *he* trusts *you*, considering that you’re the ones who are being – being *jerks*!”

Stunned silence follows her outburst, broken a moment later by Asui.

“He *saved my life*,” she says, soft but firm. Her voice trembles – only slightly, but for someone who is normally so composed, it shakes everyone who hears it like an earthquake.

On the tail of Yaoyorozu’s rant, this seems to hit the class hard, a head-on collision that paints guilt over many of their faces. Uraraka reaches out to grab Asui’s hand. Shouta sighs. His anger drains away, leaving him tired and deflated, with a migraine taking root behind his eyes.

“I know it’s shocking information,” he allows, “and it’s scary to think about. But Izuku isn’t a danger to you. I’ll repeat what I told you on his first day – if you bother or harass him, I *will* find out. That hasn’t changed, and it still won’t be tolerated. Am I understood?”

One by one, Shouta’s students nod.

The door catches as it slides open, clattering on its tracks as it sticks, then banging the rest of the way into place. Midoriya stands in the doorway, hand still clenched around the door, staring at it as if it has wronged him before looking away, freezing under the collective eyes of class 1-C, Hitoshi included.

“Hey there, kiddo!” Yamada-Sensei greets, smiling easily and ignoring the curiosity of his students. “Is everything alright?”

Midoriya looks – not great. Not as bad as Hitoshi has ever seen him, but still. Midoriya is pale and stiff as a corpse, eyes blank as he looks over 1-C. It’s nothing like how he shattered to pieces after his confrontation with Hitoshi last week, but he’s clearly a far cry from

alright. Surprisingly, there aren't any tears in his eyes, but Hitoshi has no doubt they'll catch up with Midoriya soon enough, given the state of him.

You good? Hitoshi mouths as Midoriya's gaze, scanning over the class, lands on him. Midoriya doesn't seem to notice, or even recognize Hitoshi, really, which makes the hair along the back of his neck prickle against his shirt collar.

Yamada stands, approaching Midoriya slowly enough to call cautious, but casually enough to mask that caution. He stands between Midoriya and the class, easily blocking the smaller boy from view, saying something that Hitoshi can't pick up.

"T-teachers' lounge?" Midoriya blurts, too loud.

"Sounds like a plan," Yamada agrees immediately, nodding. With a gentle hand on Midoriya's shoulder, he steers him around, turning back to the class briefly. "Kawamoto! You're in charge. Kayama is right next door if you need anything. Behave!"

Kawamoto, their class representative, nods, but Yamada has already turned away, leading Midoriya away from the class and towards the teachers' lounge.

"What was that about?" someone wonders. The sentiment is echoed by several others.

"That was the new hero kid, wasn't it? Hey Shinsou – didn't you fight him during the sports festival? Is he always that weird?"

Unthinking, Hitoshi shakes his head. Midoriya is always his own kind of weird, sure, but most of the time he's mostly just goofy, nerdy, and awkward, maybe a touch anxious or too intense. Something has obviously happened for him to seek Yamada out in the middle of the school day, all blank-faced and shaken like that. Hitoshi frowns, deaf to his classmates' follow up questions.

"Where are you going, Shinsou?" Kawamoto asks.

Hitoshi realizes he's stood up, stepped away from his desk.

"Uh," he says. "Bathroom."

Kawamoto frowns, but Hitoshi ignores him – fairly standard behavior – and darts out of the room. Yamada had left the door open when he

bustled Midoriya away. Presumably to the teachers' lounge – that's what Midoriya had said.

Is Hitoshi really going to follow them? It's probably a bad idea. His nosiness has already gotten him into trouble with Midoriya, and while Midoriya himself might be kind of ridiculously forgiving, Aizawa had seemed pretty pissed about it, and Hitoshi suspects that he's far less merciful than Midoriya. Undecided, Hitoshi finds himself standing in front of the door to the teachers' lounge. Thankfully, he can't hear anything from this side of it, so he can waffle about as much as he wants without an inadvertent repeat of the eavesdropping incident.

It's not really Hitoshi's business to worry, but he's always been terrible about keeping his nose out of things that don't concern him. Besides, he and Midoriya are – well, they're not friends or anything, but they get along well enough, now. They had their "mediated conversation" exactly a week ago, and as much as Hitoshi still doesn't know the full story, as much as he can't help but still feel bitter sometimes, as much as he still regularly puts his foot in his mouth, it definitely helped him pull his head out of his ass. He and Midoriya might not be friends, but they can cooperate and tolerate each other's company.

Which may be the closest thing Hitoshi has to a friend, is the thing.

Biting his tongue, Hitoshi knocks on the door twice, hard enough that his knuckles echo with the force, and then pulls it open. On the admittedly-super-comfortable couch, Midoriya leans over his knees, hands tangled into his hair. He's crying now, as Hitoshi predicted, but he's not paying any attention to his own tears. Yamada has an arm wrapped around Midoriya's shoulders, but he looks up with a strained smile as Hitoshi stumbles into the room.

"Did you need something, Shinsou?" Yamada asks, kind but pointed.

"Fuck," Hitoshi says dumbly, tongue aching from imprints of his teeth. "Are you okay?"

"Ah, it was nice of you to check in," Yamada answers, brow pinching, but pasted on smile growing slightly more genuine. "We're fine, here, thank you, Shinsou. Just need a moment to ourselves, yeah?" He rubs a hand briskly over Midoriya's arm, pulling the boy closer to his side. Midoriya looks up, pinning Hitoshi under a flat green stare.

"Right," Hitoshi says, stilted, ears burning. "Sorry, I just – yeah, I'll go."

“Wait,” Midoriya interrupts, stopping Hitoshi just as he is reaching for the doorknob. “Why aren’t you afraid of my quirk?”

Swallowing, Hitoshi turns back to Midoriya’s intent gaze. It’s obviously an important question, and Hitoshi leans back against the door, staring up at the ceiling as he considers it. They haven’t spoken about Midoriya’s quirk since their Conversation. Clearly, it’s a topic that Midoriya prefers to avoid, and Hitoshi is perfectly happy to play along with that. Thinking of it still makes his stomach feel somewhat unsettled.

“I am afraid of your quirk,” he says finally, blunt and honest, with his hands shoved into his pockets to hide the way his fingers twitch. “It’s terrifying. I’m not going to pretend it’s not.”

“But you’re h-here,” Midoriya points out. Hitoshi doesn’t look at Midoriya, but he can feel Midoriya’s frown like it’s pressed against his skin. “To m-make sure I’m o-okay? W-why – if you–”

“That’s the thing. Your quirk is terrifying. You’re, uh, not, though? Well, you can be, I guess, but like – I’m not really afraid of you. Most of the time. So it doesn’t really matter if I’m scared of your quirk, since it’s yours.” Hitoshi pulls a hand from his pocket to wave it vaguely through the air. “Really, I’m glad it’s yours.”

Midoriya is quiet for so long that Hitoshi feels compelled to actually look at him. Midoriya’s frown has gone slack on his mouth. He stares back at Hitoshi, suspicious and uncomprehending, like Hitoshi has been speaking in tongues. Considering that Hitoshi has never been the best with words – not in situations like this, anyway – maybe he really hadn’t been making any sense. Yamada, though, doesn’t seem confused in the slightest, nodding slightly to Hitoshi when their eyes meet.

“What?” Midoriya asks, brittle.

“Your quirk,” Hitoshi clarifies. He grimaces. “I know it would have been easier if you had actually had a fire quirk or something. I know your, uh, life would have been… easier. But I just mean – if a quirk that steals other quirks *has* to exist, I’m glad you’re the one who has it. You’re probably the only person who could have it and still be so…” Hitoshi trails off with another obscure gesture of his hand, ducking his chin down against his chest to hide the flush spreading over his face.

He's probably being insensitive again. He *knows* Midoriya has trauma surrounding his quirk – probably shit worse than Hitoshi can even

imagine, so he's not even going to bother trying to fill in those gaps himself. He stands by his words, at least in the sense that he really does think the world would be totally fucked if pretty much anyone else had Midoriya's quirk. But Hitoshi didn't need to *say* as much, not to Midoriya. Like – hey, I know this thing has brought you an immense amount of suffering, but I'm glad you have it! Hitoshi may as well have said that he's glad Midoriya went through all that unimaginable shit.

"Anyway," he continues abruptly after a long moment of silence, "what happened?"

The silence drags on as if unbroken. That was probably the wrong question to ask, Hitoshi realizes, a second too late, as always. Bringing up the cause of Midoriya's current crisis definitely won't do anything to get them out of this conversational minefield.

Why had he come here again? Really, what had he thought he could offer this situation? God, Hitoshi really shouldn't be allowed to speak. Berating himself internally, Hitoshi runs a finger over the small nick on the bridge of his nose.

"Katsuki told everyone," Midoriya answers, right as Hitoshi is contemplating taking a vow of silence. "All of 1-A knows about my quirk. They're all going to hate me, now." Midoriya's claims are desolately confident. Hitoshi slumps further into the door behind him, inching to the side as the doorknob nearly jabs him in the hip.

"Eh, probably not," he counters, looking to Yamada for back-up. Hitoshi is met with only a curious, expectant look. He picks at his cuticles. "Well, *I* don't hate you. And most of 1-A seems way nicer than me, right, so, uh – they won't hate you. Not all of them, at least. That's probably, um, statistically unlikely or something."

Yamada smiles at Hitoshi, which is so completely unhelpful that Hitoshi is tempted to flip him off. Really, Yamada is the one who is good with people, and he clearly has some kind of connection with Midoriya. Hitoshi, as jaded and pessimistic as he is, certainly isn't qualified to be giving any pep talks.

"You're weird," Midoriya says thickly. He rubs the heel of his palm beneath his eyes, scrubbing away the salt crust of dried tears there.

Hitoshi frowns. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"You're n-not denying."

“Well, I – shut up. If I’m weird, then you’re – you’re weirder.”

“Prob-bably.”

Half-hearted and weary, Midoriya laughs. It’s not a particularly happy noise, but Hitoshi is still oddly proud to have caused it. Maybe his vow of silence can wait a little longer, maybe there’s hope for him yet when it comes to this whole civil human interaction thing. At least so long as he’s talking to someone as weird as Midoriya.

“What’ll I do if they h-hate me?” Midoriya asks, contemplative and concerned.

Sympathy aches like a bruise along Hitoshi’s ribs. Normally, when Midoriya gets upset, he falls to pieces in such a jagged and dramatic way that Hitoshi can feel nothing but panicked confusion at the spectacle. Feelings like Midoriya’s – Hitoshi doesn’t know how they get like that, or what to do about them. He won’t begrudge Midoriya for it – Lord knows Hitoshi’s brain is broken in its own fun and fucked up ways – but it’s extreme and individual enough that Hitoshi can’t really *relate* to it at all.

Not this, though. This quiet, insecure anxiety is all too familiar to Hitoshi. He knows the fear, he knows the reality, and he knows the painful cycle of fear becoming reality, again and again.

“It’s not the end of the world,” he answers. “There are definitely people who will hate you because they’re afraid of your quirk. And it’ll definitely suck. But that won’t be everyone. I mean – you don’t fear-hate me, do you?” The question rolls awkwardly from Hitoshi’s tongue as he considers taking it back half-way through.

“Of course not!” Midoriya replies in an instant, adamant and unashamed.

“Uh, r-right. Then I don’t see why anyone should fear-hate you. Hell, you’re probably less likely to use your quirk against someone than I am.”

“It’s not that e-easy,” Midoriya says after a moment, resigned and almost petulant. Hitoshi tugs a hand through his hair.

“No, it’s not,” he agrees. “But they’re the ones making it hard. Not you. Who you are doesn’t change just because other people are too blind to see it.”

“How do you deal with it?”

Hitoshi shifts uncomfortably. It is one thing to discuss his experiences through the veil of advice, even as thin as it is, and another to speak of them openly. Of course, everything he is saying to Midoriya is something that Hitoshi has been telling himself for years, but it’s not like it ever actually made anything easier.

With a jerky shrug, Hitoshi says, “I prove them wrong.”

“Tea?” Nedzu offers with a benign smile, hoisting up a tea pot the size of his head as he pours himself a cup.

“No,” Katsuki responds flatly. As if Katsuki hasn’t spoken, Nedzu pours a second cup, sliding the saucer over the desk, the china clinking softly. The top of the principal’s desk gleams with a rich, red shine, nearly matching the shade of the tea.

“I had my assistant call your parents,” Nedzu says. “They should be here soon enough. Before that – can you tell me why you’re here, Bakugou?”

“Because of Deku.” Katsuki swallows, amends, “Because I yelled at him or whatever.”

Or whatever. Katsuki doesn’t know what he did. He doesn’t know what he said. Katsuki clenches his hands on top of his thighs, trying to isolate the feeling of fabric against his knuckles, as if that could recalibrate his body, bring it back into alignment with his mind. Nedzu watches him with beady black eyes, head tilted slightly, smile still mockingly mild.

“You didn’t yell, particularly. Would you like to see?”

No. Katsuki would like to leave.

He says nothing. Taking his lack of response as a yes, Nedzu twists one of the monitors on his desk, rotating it towards Katsuki. On the screen, there is a surprisingly high-resolution image of class 1-A. Frog Face stands in front of Deku, Cheeks by her side. Katsuki’s own pale blond head is bowed over his desk not far in front of them. Nedzu

presses a button on his keyboard, and Frog Face's voice drifts into the room.

"Thank you, Izuku," she says.

"Fuck you," the Katsuki on screen says without moving. "Fuck all of you. Why does no one else ever see it? Ever since Auntie–"

"*Don't* talk about my mother," Deku interrupts. Silence reigns, over the speakers and in the office.

Stop, Katsuki thinks to this past version of himself, unrecognizable despite the short amount of time separating them. Leave it. Drop it. Grit your teeth and ignore it. *You can't keep doing this.*

"About what?" Katsuki hears himself ask, with barely any inflection. "About how she lied for years? About how she broke the law to fool everyone into thinking you were Quirkless because she was convinced the villains would come for you if they knew?" His voice breaks. "Well, she was right. They came for you, and you went, and I'm not keeping your fucking secrets anymore."

"Bakubro… maybe you should–"

"Shut up," Katsuki barks, turning in his seat to stare Deku down. Katsuki sees his own eyes in the recording and turns his gaze back to the red wood of Nedzu's desk instead. "You stole my quirk. You stole it and you cried and you *cried* and Auntie fucking coddled you and told me I could never tell anyone what you did. She made me sleep in your fucking bed. I slept in your bed, and you slept with her because god forbid I try to attack you in your sleep.

"I – I didn't sleep. I thought I was dead. I thought I was in hell. How was I supposed to sleep when you had *stolen my fucking quirk*. Oh, but it was fine. You didn't mean to. You didn't mean to ruin my life.

"And you gave it back, so it didn't matter. Didn't matter that you could do it again, whenever you wanted, no, it was an *accident*. How many quirks have you stolen on purpose? You didn't have any of this fancy bullshit five years ago. How many lives have you ruined, Deku?

"I'll make it clear for all you idiots. Midoriya Izuku's quirk isn't *pyrokinesis*. He can steal quirks from other people. Not copy. Not borrow. *Steal*. Sure, he can give them back, but look at all the bullshit he can do and open your fucking eyes. Just because he *can* doesn't mean he fucking *will*. You're all idiots if you think this will end well."

Nedzu pauses the video just as Hobo-Sensei slams the door open.

Katsuki feels sick.

Regret isn't an emotion he fucks around with. There's no point to it. No, he's not regretful. He's *repulsed*.

He didn't mean to say any of that shit. He shouldn't have. That's what he had resolved to do – ignore it, ignore him, ignore everything. He *knew* that he was all fucked up and twisted around and *wrong* about Deku, and he was – he was fucking working on it, and until then, he was supposed to *ignore it*.

Except he was too fucking weak, too pathetic, to follow through. He couldn't even control his own goddamned self.

"You had your second session with Hound Dog earlier this week, didn't you?" Nedzu asks. "How did that go?"

Katsuki tenses harshly against the flinch that tries to tear through him.

Everyone has weaknesses. That's what Hound Dog told him.

"Ah, my apologies. You don't have to answer that, of course."

"Therapy's fine," Katsuki bites out.

It sucks. He feels like holes are being poked through his brain. He feels like he's sprung a leak somewhere and *things* are getting through to places they were never meant to be. Everyone says it's meant to help, but Katsuki doesn't see the benefit of rehashing things that he has long since killed and buried six feet underground.

Dead things can come back to haunt us if we don't properly put them to rest. That's what Hound Dog told him.

Katsuki fucking hates Hound Dog.

"I'm glad to hear it," Nedzu says, as if he didn't notice Katsuki's unapologetic lie. "Would you be willing to increase the frequency of your sessions?"

"Not like I have much of a fucking choice."

"On the contrary, this is entirely your own decision. Involuntary therapy is often counterproductive. When done correctly, it's an active process that requires willing participation. Do you *want* to get better,

Bakugou?"

Katsuki grits his teeth. "I'm fucking fine."

"Of course," Nedzu allows. "But do you want to be *better*."

"…*Yes,*" Katsuki admits, the word pulled from the core of him like a rotten tooth wrenched out with pliers. It hurts in an unnatural, viscerally horrifying way. It's a relief once it's done.

"Alright! How does twice a week sound, then?"

"Fine."

"Excellent! Now, if I'm not mistaken, I believe your parents have–"

The door bangs open, knocking against the wall with enough force that Katsuki's untouched drink ripples in its cup.

"Oi, brat! What've you done now?"

"Mitsuki, darling," Katsuki's old man frets, easing the door closed and shooting a stressed look to the dent its handle put into the wall. "Sorry, sir, we can pay to have that repaired."

"No worries," Nedzu says easily, flapping a dismissive paw. "Take a seat, please. There are some issues that need to be addressed."

"Issues," the old hag repeats, narrowing her eyes as she sits.

"Yes," Nedzu confirms, smile disappearing as he grows fully serious. "I'm told that you're already aware of the basics of the situation with Midoriya Izuku?"

"Izukun? What does he have to do with this?"

"Katsuki, if you are bothering that poor boy, I swear to god–"

"The tensions in 1-A have been mounting, leading today to the public revealing of some privileged details of Izuku's background."

"Katsuki," his old man sighs, "tell me you didn't."

"For what it's worth," Nedzu offers, "I don't believe he strictly meant to. He didn't seem to be fully aware of himself at the time. For clarification, your son isn't here for disciplinary action, necessarily. The larger issue is the incident's implications towards his mental

health."

Katsuki scowls hard into his lap. He's perfectly fucking healthy. He hasn't had so much as a cold in years. Then it's all in his head, something no one can see or change or fight, just him, being a fucking *problem.* His father reaches over, squeezing Katsuki's shoulder. His mother is oddly quiet. Katsuki can't stand to look at either of them.

"This behavior is unsustainable," Nedzu goes on, "and the trend is concerning. If this pattern continues, more drastic action will quickly become necessary, and *that* is why I called you here. For intervention. You have the potential to be an excellent hero, Bakugou. But not like this."

You can't keep doing this. That's what Hound Dog told him.

"I suggest you take the next couple of days off. You are not being formally suspended, but I think it would be best for everyone if you stayed home until internships begin. Use the time to get your head back in order. Perhaps make an appointment with Hound Dog. Allow Izuku and the class to process what has happened today."

"Is that all?" the old hag asks, uncharacteristically quiet.

"There's one more thing. Bakugou, you are officially being placed on probation."

"What?!" Katsuki shouts, snapping upright in his chair and shaking his father's hand from his shoulder. "That's bullshit! You said this wasn't about fucking punishment!"

"I also said that your behavior is concerning. As such, you will be monitored more closely until the issue is sufficiently resolved."

"What does a probation entail?" Katsuki's father asks, replacing his grip on Katsuki's shoulder as Katsuki leans forward in his chair with a snarl.

"Nothing extreme, I assure you. Consider it a warning, more than anything. As I said, he will be monitored closely, and continuing this pattern of antagonism towards his classmates will not be tolerated. In particular, his interactions with Izuku will be scrutinized. I'm aware of your struggle, Bakugou, but this cannot go on."

You. Cannot. Keep. Doing. This.

Katsuki knows. He already fucking knows.

Abandoning his serious composure, Nedzu grins brightly. “Any other questions?”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my GOD, hello again, it’s me, the Demon That Over Explains Things. I don’t even know if anyone will notice since it’s been, like, 10 months and 200k+ words, but I want to avoid any confusion.
The things Bakugou says during his episode *do not* match up with the events of the first chapter. That’s because I’ve been planning to edit those events, probably since all the way back in Erasure, and just haven’t done it yet because I’m saving revisions for the theoretical day that IGG is completed. So, what Bakugou says here, while inconsistent, is a pared down version of what actually happened, and some day chapter one will be edited to reflect that.
Alright, that’s all for this instalment of Ghost Feels the Need to Explain Everything They Do. Thanks for coming, see you next week!

Aizawa @ 1-A: Never talk to me or my son ever again

Mic: Why are you here, Shinsou?
Hitoshi: Uh,,, moral support?
Hitoshi, internally: dear god, how do you support a fucking moral? What am I DOING HERE???

Bakugou: *screams into a jar and caps it*
Bakugou: It’s fine. I’m fine.

Next chapter: Brainwashing – Part VIII
Update: Aug 5

(Edit 8/19: IGG has *not* been abandoned, but I am adjusting to new medications and various other life changes, so please be patient while I try to get myself back in order)

Brainwashing - Part VIII

Chapter Notes

> Well hello again. Sorry for the unanticipated month-long hiatus. Hopefully nothing in this chapter is too jarring or out of place, tone/style/characterization wise – if it is, bear with me, I'm out of practice. With that said,,, if you've got any kindness to spare this week,,, *jingles mug like a miserable little street beggar*
>
> I can't say regular updates are back again just yet, but rest assured that IGG is still alive. And should I ever become unable to finish this project, I'll publish all the notes I have (detailed plot beats, snippets, memes, everything). I've never promised completion, but I can damn well promise closure. From now on, updates, when they occur, will be on Wednesdays. Hopefully I won't be gone for another month, but please don't worry if I am. Thank you for your patience and understanding!
>
> Unfortunately, no memes with this update. I don't have the energy to dig them all out of the discord a month after the fact, but know that I appreciate each and every one of them – I have them all saved to a special folder on my phone that never fails to improve my mood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There will be no more good days.

That's what Izuku thought, when the aghast stares of class 1-A dug into his skin like frayed splinters. Dreams he had only half-dared to dream shattered just like that, scattered into fleeting little rainbows like a popped bubble, tacky and cold like drying tears. So long to peace and belonging and the hesitant sense of dawning hope that his life could ever be more than endless restitution.

That's what Izuku *thought*.

By lunch the next day, he's starting to think he could have been wrong.

Izuku slips into the classroom right before the bell rings. Eraser gives him a look as he slides into his seat, but says nothing, glaring at the whole of the unusually tame class before starting on the morning's business.

When Izuku dares an investigative glance around the room, he sees several people darting him similar, cautious looks. Koda startles as their eyes meet, but after a nervous moment, signs a shaky, one-handed greeting that nearly reduces Izuku to tears. Ojiro looks back at Izuku as well, but he does so with a frown, lines creased into his forehead. The tip of his tail twitches restlessly next to the leg of his desk. Briefly, his eyes dart past Izuku's shoulder, and then he flinches into his shoulders and turns to face the front.

Looking behind him, Izuku is greeted by Yaoyorozu's fierce glare, though surprisingly, it's aimed around the room instead of at him. Her face smooths into a smile, hesitant and weak, when she looks at him.

"Good morning," she whispers, even though Eraser is still drawling on with information about internships. It's nothing they haven't heard at least twice before, but it's unlike her to speak over him.

"M-morning," Izuku says back. The word has barely any air behind it, practically a silent movement of his lips. The burning behind his eyes intensifies, and he turns away, blinking rapidly.

Her defensive glare and reassuring smile set a precedent for the rest of the day. Despite her claims against leadership, Yaoyorozu steps up. She is a firm and protective presence at Izuku's back, discouraging people from so much as looking at him wrong throughout the first half of the day. He has no idea what he's done to deserve that kind of loyalty, but when the bell rings for lunch, he can be nothing but grateful that he won't have to spend it hiding in the teacher's lounge again.

Yaoyorozu leads him to their normal table and sits across from him, as has become routine over the last week, and while Izuku may be relieved for her presence, he can't help but tense up as he waits for others to join them. Or not, as the case may be.

Tokoyami had been quiet all day, not necessarily ignoring Izuku, but not engaging with him, either. Arriving to class as late as he had, Izuku had seen little of Kasumi – classes bored her, so she tended not to manifest during them, though she had made a brief appearance during English to bite Izuku's ear, laugh, and then disappear again.

Aoyama, on almost the exact opposite side of the classroom, hadn't interacted with Izuku at all yet today. That wasn't necessarily abnormal for them, as far apart as their seats were. Sometimes, they talked before homeroom began, if they were both there early, but

Izuku had intentionally left no time for socializing in his morning. Occasionally, Aoyama would lean back to say something to Ashido and Kaminari, who spent most of the morning whispering together. Call him paranoid, but Izuku suspects that his own name is probably woven into those quiet conversations.

In the middle of overthinking exactly what all that could mean, the seats on either side of Izuku are filled. Aoyama clatters about with large, exaggerated arcs of his limbs as he settles down with his meal. Tokoyami sits in a smooth, silent movement, that could have gone entirely unnoticed, if not for Kasumi darting around him to steal a slice of meat from Izuku. Mic has actually started to make extra, specifically for her, but she likes to think she's doing something she's not supposed to, so Izuku plays along and pulls his food closer to himself, as if to guard it.

"*Bonjour,*" Aoyama greets with a beaming smile, pulling his food away from Kasumi's claws. "Jirou and Mei haven't joined us yet?"

"Whoever knows what Mei is getting up to," Yaoyorozu says, nose scrunching delicately. "But Jirou…" Her eyes skirt to the side. A few tables away, Jirou sits with Ojiro and Shoji. Yaoyorozu avoids looking at Izuku as she purses her lips and fiddles with her fingers.

Jirou has only been eating with them for a couple of days. Before that, she bounced between eating with Yaoyorozu and Todoroki, and Ojiro and Shoji. She could very well be doing the same thing now – dividing her days between the different groups of people she was interested in spending time with. The timing could be a coincidence.

Izuku stares at the ceiling, strips of fluorescent lights distorting through a film of tears as he compels himself not to start crying. Yaoyorozu hums a distressed note; Aoyama pats Izuku between the shoulder blades. The casual, unwary touch makes the tears brim over, and Izuku slams his eyes closed to try to stem the flow before it really gets going.

"Certainly she only needs a moment to sort this new chaos into her thoughts," Tokoyami offers softly.

"It's n-not that," Izuku says, shaking his head. "I just – th-thank you."

He is not crying because Jirou left. He is crying because the others stayed.

"There's nothing to thank us for," Aoyama says. "Now, I demand

opinions." Without further delay, he launches into a dramatic retelling of a story he insists happened to his older sister, away at college in France. As with most stories Aoyama tells, there is very little room to actually offer any opinions, but he effectively captures everyone's attention and diffuses the tension growing around them.

It's another thing to be grateful for, Aoyama's knack for navigating tense situations without making it obvious that his distractions are deliberate. Warm and relieved, Izuku will just hold the gratitude close to his heart for now, rather than verbalize it again. Yesterday, Izuku had been sure that everything was ruined. This morning, he thought that today, and every day from now on, was going to be a bad day.

It easily could have been.

Ojiro's disapproving stare. Ashido and Kaminari's obvious gossiping. So many budding relationships turned on their heads before they could really blossom. No one was behaving quite the same as before. Sero made one joke in the morning, forced and flat. No one laughed, and he didn't try again. Kirishima's smile was strained, and it fell whenever he looked at Katsuki's empty desk. Uraraka jumped when she saw Izuku, then fumbled through countless incoherent apologies for it until Tsu stepped in to stop her. Iida ignored Izuku all together.

Izuku doesn't hold any of it against them. He understands how confused they must be, how afraid. There's no cruelty in their actions, no hatred – only uneasy tension, and that's far better than Izuku could have asked for. His story has always been a horror-tragedy, not something for polite company. He understands why so many of them are pulling away now.

Not to say that understanding makes it hurt any less.

Still, it's for the best.

Katsuki's reveal was like a wartime amputation. A blunt saw to a damaged limb, not nearly enough anesthetic to dull the bite of it through flesh and bone. It is horrifying, painful, and messy. Everyone who bears witness to something like that is shaken by it; no one is ever quite the same afterwards.

Izuku has kept this secret so long it was practically a part of him. But a damaged part, constantly threatening to necrose, to poison him inside and out. Things like that, they need to be cut away. Maybe there is no kind way to do it, no kind way to save a life from itself.

Of course things are different. Izuku is suddenly missing his most detested and fiercely protected limb. That changes things. But it doesn't change them nearly as much as he expected.

Here, in this bubble made by his friends, it almost feels like nothing has changed at all.

To complete the picture – as if to prove that some things truly never do change – Mei appears out of nowhere, covered in soot. She slams a handful of protein bars down on the table as she slumps into her seat next to Yaoyorozu. Petulantly opening one of the protein bars, Mei breaks off a chunk to toss to Kasumi, who snaps it out of the air only to shudder and pull a face.

"Maijima-Sensei kicked me out," Mei announces with her mouth full.

"You got… ash in my food," Yaoyorozu says.

"Sorry. Protein bar?"

"Don't do it!" Kasumi interrupts, batting the snack out of Mei's hand as she offers it to Yaoyorozu. "They taste like sawdust!"

"I don't think I've been working with wood, recently," Mei says thoughtfully, holding the half-eaten bar up at eye level, crosshair pupils contracting as she inspects it. "No, wait. These are prepackaged. That's just the way they taste!"

Izuku stifles a laugh as Mei shrugs and shoves the rest of the protein bar in her mouth before ripping open the next one to a background of Kasumi's shrieks. Tokoyami appeases her with his own food. Yaoyorozu flicks a few grey-specked chunks of rice out of her food. Aoyama is unapologetic in his own laughter, pushing his unsullied meal across the table, a silent offer to share that Yaoyorozu accepts with a shy smile.

All things considered, Izuku can't say it's a particularly good day.

But it's not a bad one, either.

"Do you want me to make the call?" Hizashi asks, scrubbing his fingers over Shouta scalp. Shouta, head in Zashi's lap, eyes closed,

considers feigning sleep.

“No,” he sighs after a resigned pause. “I can do it. You focus on getting stuff ready around the apartment.”

“I don’t think that’ll take half as much effort as you’re expecting.”

Shouta slits an eye open, staring up at his husband doubtfully. Hizashi grins down at him, unconcerned. Shouta reaches up to tweak his mustache, ignoring the indignant squawk that elicits. Hizashi pulls his hand away from Shouta’s hair to nurse his sore upper lip, but Shouta intercepts it on the way, insistently tugging it back down until Hizashi relents and resumes his petting.

“Where are they all going to sleep?” Shouta questions. “We don’t have room.”

“Bed, futon, and couch. Problem solved.”

“We’re going to make one of them sleep on the couch?”

“It’s a good couch,” Hizashi says with a shrug. “You sleep here all the time.” Shouta concedes the point.

“Do we have enough blankets?”

“Yes, Kitten. We have an absolute hoard of blankets in the closet.”

“I like to be cozy,” Shouta grumbles.

“I know. Which is why we have plenty of blankets.”

“How are we going to feed them all? Have you seen Shinsou eat? He’s like a blackhole.”

“They’re growing boys, Shouta. That’s what they do. I seem to recall a certain someone being particularly ravenous when he went through his own growth spurt.”

“We’ll need to cook enough to feed an army, practically.”

Hizashi laughs. “We? I’m sorry, in what reality are *you* doing any of this cooking? You would poison them.”

“That’s an idea,” Shouta says, humming as he considers it. “It would solve the problem, at least.”

“Murder isn’t the solution,” Hizashi says with condescendingly sympathetic regret. He pats Shouta’s head, before nudging his temple until Shouta gets the signal and obliges, sitting up with a sigh. Hizashi stands, stretching his arms above his head as his spine pops, turning back to Shouta to drop a kiss on top of his head.

“It’ll be fine,” he assures. “You’ll see. It’ll be nice to have a full house!”

“Too full,” Shouta complains. Rolling his eyes fondly, Hizashi makes his way to the kitchen to start on dinner. Shouta calls to him, “Three teenagers, Zashi! The three cats were bad enough. Good god, they’re going to outnumber us three to one.”

“We’ll just have to hope they don’t team up and try to stage a coup,” Hizashi says, with an all too careless shrug of his shoulders. When internships come and everything dissolves into chaos, Shouta will be ready and waiting with an *I told you so*.

After only a week in 1-A, Izuku had come to Shouta and Hizashi asking for not one, but *two*, favors. Of course, neither favor was really for Izuku’s benefit, but that he felt comfortable coming to them at all, making requests of them – that alone was incredible progress. Zashi had nearly started crying, he had gotten so emotional. Thankfully, he had managed to restrain himself until he and Shouta were alone in their room that night, so Izuku wouldn’t misinterpret his reaction.

Both Shouta and Hizashi were eager to give Izuku anything he asked for, within reason. They wanted him to trust them, to rely on them for help and support. Shouta sticks by that. He made a commitment when he volunteered to house the kid, and Shouta will do his damnedest to be the best guardian – *parent* – he can be. Boy, does it make life more complicated, though.

Shouta had already been dreading having to wrangle Izuku and Shinsou together for an entire week, but to add Todoroki to the mix? It’s madness. There’s a non-zero chance that he and Shinsou will try to kill each other. Shouta can imagine it now: Todoroki, son of the number two hero, with his aloof and frosty temperament; Shinsou, with his defensive nature and disdain for “hero brats,” only slightly quelled by his new understanding with Izuku.

On the bright side – the only bright side, in Shouta’s opinion – Todoroki would technically be Hizashi’s responsibility, so Shouta wouldn’t have to handle all three of them on his own.

Well, a second bright side, Shouta acknowledges – Hizashi is excited.

He doesn't normally take interns. None of UA's teachers do. While hero students have the week away from school, the teachers still have a handful classes to teach. But when Izuku had approached them about Todoroki's situation, they couldn't deny that the solution Izuku proposed was a good one, even with the scheduling conflicts.

Finally, Todoroki is showing an interest in gaining control of the fire aspect of his quirk – an interest that Shouta would be remiss to discourage. For personal reasons, Todoroki doesn't seem particularly interested in working with his father, and Shouta certainly doesn't blame him for that. Instead, Todoroki approached Izuku, and Izuku suggested that he work with Hizashi, which would allow the two boys to work with their fire together while also having the supervision of a trusted pro hero who has extensive experience with volatile and uncontrolled quirks.

Hizashi was thrilled to say yes.

The second favor, the one Izuku asked of Shouta specifically, was slightly more concerning.

Iida Tenya is interning in Hosu. Hosu, where his brother was attacked. Hosu, where Stain, his brother's attacker, still lingers.

Shouta should have noticed on his own. He should have seen the agency on Iida's forms and made the connection. He shouldn't have dismissed the way Iida would stare into space only to force himself to normalcy the moment someone caught his attention. Unfortunately, Shouta himself has been far too distracted these last few weeks, and he is slipping because of it.

There is, at least, an easy solution to retroactively make up for his obliviousness.

Since Stain's attacks, petty crime rates have risen throughout Hosu. The area is desperate for more heroes on its streets, and as an essentially freelance, underground hero, Shouta can easily mobilize to wherever he is needed, without having to worry about an abundance of red tape getting in his way. All he needs to do is make a phone call to learn when Manual is planning to take Iida onto the streets, so Shouta can coordinate his own plans to be there as backup, just in case things go south.

Problem is, he really doesn't want to make that damn phone call.

Might as well get it over with, though. With a sigh, he pulls out his

phone, dialing with tired fingers.

Katsuki never learned to watch his mouth. He says what he wants, when he wants. If that's vulgarity or insults, so be it. Thinking before he speaks has never been Katsuki's way, and why should it be? He doesn't give a fuck, and he doesn't give a fuck if he's misunderstood, or if some poor fragile extra gets their feelings hurt.

The feeling of words sticking in his throat, gumming his teeth together and blocking air from reaching his lungs, is still a new one for Katsuki, but it has been becoming all too familiar since Deku reentered his life. Katsuki knows exactly what he is meant to say, but for once, his thoughts race around the words like a lasso keeping them in. Katsuki's dinner sits in front of him, untouched, and his mother and father tend to their own food as if nothing is wrong. The silence settled around the table shatters that illusion.

Early that day, Katsuki had sat churlishly on the couch in Hound Dog's office while the man had said, "You should tell your parents."

And Katsuki had replied, "Telling people is what landed me in this damn mess."

"What happened when you were young – that's as much your story to tell as it is Midoriya's. Your parents deserve to know. *You* deserve to have them know."

Katsuki's nails dig into the tabletop. His old man's eye dart to the movement, filled with a tired concern that prickles against Katsuki's skin.

What good would telling them do? It's not like they would understand – no one ever has. They would be just as tired of him, just as tired of trying and failing to *deal* with him as they always have been.

"How was your appointment?" Katsuki's father asks carefully. Obviously, he knows Katsuki won't appreciate the question, so Katsuki doesn't know why he even bothers asking. It would be so much easier, for all of them, if they stopped bothering to *try*.

"None of your business," Katsuki snaps past the tightness in his throat.

His mother's eyes flash. "It was shitty, alright? I'm supposed to–" Katsuki chokes, swallows, like a rock grinding down along his windpipe.

"Kat?" the old hag asks, suddenly softer, harsh edges blurred by a hesitant worry that suits his father better than her.

"You don't need to talk about it," the old man assures gently.

"No. It's fucking – Deku." Through gritted teeth, Katsuki corrects himself, "Midoriya."

"Katsuki, you–" His mother cuts herself off with a sigh. "What did he ever do to you?" Reflexively, Katsuki bristles, though the question is more an honest inquiry than an accusation.

Katsuki wants to scream, but not even that could get past the strangle-tightness of his throat. He misses being able to say whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He misses knowing what he wanted to begin with. Don't think, just talk, don't even think. Clenching his fists so hard his nails bite into his skin, Katsuki focuses on the sting-throb in his palms until a quiet static fills his head.

Haltingly, he explains.

Therapy is fucking stupid, but Katsuki has always been a model student. Never in his life has he struggled with a homework assignment, and he'll be damned if *therapy* is the thing that finally gets one over on him.

When he runs out of words, his parents stare at him.

Finally, the old hag says, "I've really fucked you up, haven't I?"

"It's not my *fucking fault!*" he shouts, voice cracking in at least three different places. His knees shake beneath him as he pushes himself out of his chair. His mother stands with him, and Katsuki locks his knees and jaw, bracing himself in preparation for an argument. He won't win – there's no winning with his goddamned mother – but he will give her hell and go down screaming. That's the way it always ends. He doesn't know why he even bothers to try. It would be so much easier to just –

"No, Katsuki," his mother says, more evenly than he expected. "No. It's not. *I'm* the one who has fucked up, here. Not you – me. I'm so fucking sorry."

Katsuki feels muted again. “What?” he chokes.

“Why did you never *tell me?*” she asks, her own voice cracking in a way Katsuki hasn’t heard since Auntie Inko died.

“Because – because you’d be on his fucking side!”

“I would never–” She walks around the table, reaching for him, and Katsuki can’t help but flinch back, uncomprehending, mind reeling. With a quietly devastated expression that looks impossible on her face, Katsuki’s mother pulls her hand back, pressing it against her chest. Katsuki’s father grabs her gently by the elbow.

“We are on *your* side, Katsuki,” the old man says. “Always.”

A bitter laugh grates through Katsuki’s teeth. “Must not have gotten the fucking memo.”

His father concedes, “We are on your side… as well as we know how to be.”

“So what? You’re not gonna tell me how it *wasn’t Deku’s fault?* How he *didn’t mean to?* How he’s *such a good person?*”

Regaining her composure, Katsuki’s mother straightens up, meeting Katsuki’s eyes with a steely look. “That’s all true,” she says, “and I’ll damn well say as much whenever you need to hear it.” Katsuki’s lips curl back over his teeth, but she continues, raising her voice before he can start snarling, “*But* if he hurt you, it doesn’t *matter* if he meant to. You are *allowed* to be hurt, or afraid, or angry.”

“Not cruel, though,” Katsuki’s father interjects quietly.

His mother falters briefly. “No, not that. That’s not… good, Kat. It’s not a good way to handle things. But – god, I get it, okay? I understand. And I should have fucking understood sooner. I am your *mother*–”

“We’re your parents.”

“It’s our job to support you, to protect you. And god knows it’s a full-time fucking gig most days, but it’s what we’re here for.” She reaches for Katsuki again, holding him by the shoulders when he doesn’t flinch away this time. “We love you, brat. Maybe I don’t say it enough, or maybe I don’t show it in the right ways, but I fucking *love you*. We’re on your side. We just need you to tell us what that side looks like.”

There are a million protests crowded on Katsuki's tongue. Things about how he doesn't need their help and support, things about how he can take care of himself, about how shitty they must be at their so-called "job." About how he doesn't want to be a *job* at all. Then his mother pulls him into a hug – too tight, and he hates the smell of her perfume – and his complaints dissolve in his mouth. His father rests a broad, warm palm between Katsuki's shoulder blades.

Katsuki's eyes burn like smoke and too-bright flashes of light.

Hitoshi bobs his head to his music as he folds a shirt into a sloppy rectangle. He swears he's trying to be neat about it, taking his time and everything, but his clothes always end up misaligned and lumpy, despite his best efforts. His father would say it's a side effect of the bachelor lifestyle, Hitoshi is sure. Placing the shirt into his bag, he moves on to the next.

"Make sure you have enough underwear."

Hitoshi turns with a dirty look as he folds the shirt in half. His father leans against the doorway, smile too wide and pleasant in a way that can only be teasing. Hitoshi considers ignoring him but catches sight of the mug in his father's hands. The manipulative bastard knows Hitoshi's every weakness and never hesitates to resort to bribery.

"Is that for me?" Hitoshi asks dryly, rather than justify the underwear comment with a response.

"Depends. You gonna let me hover with minimal teenaged brooding?"

Hitoshi considers it for a moment. Grudgingly, he shoves some of his unfolded clothes away from the corner of his bed, gesturing for his father to sit while reaching for the mug.

"Helicopter," Hitoshi accuses as his father obligingly hands the coffee over.

"Guilty as charged. So, I was serious about the underwear thing."

Hitoshi groans, already regretting his decision. "I have enough underwear."

“More than enough? You should pack extra, just in case.”

“Yeah, yeah, I have it covered. Seriously, I’m fifteen, not five. I can take care of my own underwear.”

“You can’t blame me for being worried. It’s my fatherly duty. And I brought you coffee.” Hitoshi takes a sip – it’s bitter and hot enough that the hair along his arms prickles. “I expect you to call every night.”

“I’ll be busy,” Hitoshi counters. “Eraserhead does most of his work at night, you know. I’ll be exhausted, too, with training on top of that.”

“Text me, then.”

“If I have time.”

“I’m sure you can find a minute to spare to let your old man know you’re doing okay.”

Hitoshi pouts, but relents, “Fine.”

“And if you *do* have a spare moment, or if you need anything, then you call me.”

“I *know*, Dad.”

“It’s almost like you’re not even going to miss me,” Hitoshi’s father says, feigning hurt.

Hitoshi scrunches up his nose, shrugging awkwardly. Truth is, he probably will miss his father, at least if he’s not kept too busy to even really notice the separation. Obviously, he’s not going to admit that, though. His father would never let him live it down, and the man is already insufferable enough.

“Pretty sure you’ll be the one missing me,” Hitoshi says flatly.

“Of course I will,” his father responds, playfulness swapping out for nauseatingly heartfelt sincerity. “You’re my baby. I don’t know what I’ll do without your sullen silence keeping me company.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” As much as Hitoshi means to sound disinterested and dismissive, a bitter note makes its way into his voice. He still remembers a time when his father had no issue being away from him.

“We haven’t been apart for more than a day or two since you came to live with me,” his father says softly. The inadvertent reference to Hitoshi’s own thoughts, to that *before* time, when Hitoshi was young, causes something sharp to twist in his chest.

He clears his throat uncomfortably, turning his attention to the shirt he’s folding. In his distraction, Hitoshi has particularly mangled the job and he shakes it out to start from scratch. Chances are the effort will be mostly futile, but it gives him something to busy himself with, at least.

“You’ll get used to it,” he says casually after a moment. “After all, it’s just a matter of time until I’m a pro hero, off with patrols of my own and shit like that.”

Focused on the lines of the shirt beneath his hands, Hitoshi can still see the way his father grimaces from the corner of his eye. As many jokes as his father cracks, as much as he teases, it’s still painfully obvious that he’s not on board with what Hitoshi is doing. It would probably be better for them both if Hitoshi stopped intentionally pushing those buttons, but he’ll admit it gives him a sick sort of satisfaction. Sadistically, he likes to see his father squirm, likes to rub it in that Hitoshi is succeeding where his father thought he couldn’t, where his father didn’t want him to.

Masochistically, though, it’s a bit like poking a bruise. It aches, but Hitoshi can’t stop doing it.

His father takes a deep, abrupt breath. “I’m proud of you, Jellybean.”

Startled, Hitoshi shakes the shirt he’s folding out for the second time. At a loss for anything meaningful to say in response, he deflects, “God, stop with that nickname already.”

“Sorry Hitoshi, but you’ll always be my Jellybean.”

“No, come on. I’m gonna be a *pro hero*. I’m gonna stop villains and shit, like a total badass. I think I’ve graduated past Jellybean.”

“Mhmm, you’ll be amazing alright.” Hitoshi swallows, his throat suddenly feeling thick. “The pro hero – Jellybean.”

Any soft emotions Hitoshi may have been feeling – not that he’s admitting to feeling anything soft – evaporate immediately. He scowls, protesting loudly over his father’s laughter.

“You’re folding job is terrible, by the way,” Hitoshi’s father says when he finally calms down.

“Like you could do any better,” Hitoshi huffs.

His father shrugs. “Blame the bachelor lifestyle.”

Three glassy sets of eyes stare over Tomura’s head as he scrubs a hand over his mouth. The monster doesn’t even give him the privilege of looking at him, gazing vacantly straight ahead, just as all the other nomu lined up against the wall do. Tomura reaches up, snapping impatient fingers in front of its eyes, daringly close to the jagged set of teeth that spill out of the thing’s mouth. Not that he’s in any danger of being bitten, with the nomu all so catatonically unresponsive.

“Are they even alive?” Tomura asks shortly.

Kurogiri, standing several paces back with his arms folded behind him, responds, “For a certain definition of the word.”

“What does that even mean?” Tomura gripes. “Hey ugly – wake the fuck up.” He flicks the nomu in one of its six eyes. A filmy eyelid slides closed in the wake of his fingers, blinking shut sideways with a thick, wet click. There is no further response. Tomura grimaces and wipes his hand over the front of his hoodie as he turns back to Kurogiri, who meets his glare impassively.

“Well?” Tomura prompts. “How the hell am I supposed to use them, like this? At the USJ, Nomu did whatever I told him to. These ones are glitching out.”

“No,” Kurogiri refutes, scanning over the line of nomu. “That nomu followed your orders at your Sensei’s command. This is their default state; they need to be activated.”

“Fucking activate them, then.”

“I cannot.”

“Who can?”

Kurogiri’s silence is telling. Tomura spins away from him, pacing up

and down the line of currently *useless* soldiers while the desire to destroy something surges abruptly through his limbs. He scratches at his neck, quick thin lines that sting deep into his skin but do nothing to touch that well of restless, demanding energy at his core. Lashing a hand out, he grabs one of the nomu by the arm, clinging tight, fingers sinking through flesh and tendon and bone until the whole limb is dust on the floor and beneath Tomura's nails. Still, the nomu stares blankly forward.

"Sensei is gone, in case you haven't noticed," Tomura reminds Kurogiri unpleasantly. He shakes ash and gore from his palm with a flick of his wrist. "We have a city to raid. Traitors to execute, heroes to kill, a society to destroy. What are you doing to help with all that, huh? You're quickly outliving your usefulness."

When Tomura pins Kurogiri beneath his glare, the warp gate is unaffected, standing straight, still gripping his elbows at his back. He sighs, beleaguered – a soft, nearly soundless exhale that lifts the hair along Tomura's arms like a static charge. Without thinking, Tomura reaches out, fingers crooked stiff like talons intent on Kurogiri's neck. Equally thoughtless, Kurogiri diverts the attempt, Tomura's hand sinking through inky air and emerging feet away. His fingers stretch out with nothing beneath them and then spasm into a fist.

"Shigaraki Tomura," Kurogiri says, lightly scolding. "It's likely the doctor will be able to reprogram them. If anyone can transfer their loyalty to you, it would be him."

"And you're only telling me this now?" As expressionless as the nomu, Kurogiri stares at Tomura. Tomura gnashes his teeth and yanks his arm back through the portal. "What kind of game are you playing?" Tomura questions harshly.

"Games are yours to play, Shigaraki Tomura, not mine."

Tomura's glare narrows. Kurogiri, Sensei's most loyal servant, second only to Tomura himself. Tomura has never been able to tell what Kurogiri is thinking, and Tomura has never particularly cared to know. Kurogiri's thoughts, his feelings – to the extent he even has them – are unimportant. The warp gate is more tool than person. Tomura wonders, now, whose hands that tool has fallen into, in Sensei's absence. What becomes of loyalty, of servitude, in the face of death?

"Get the doctor here," Tomura orders. "Fix this. I have plans for Hosu,

you know. We can kill two birds with one stone. Send a message and teach the Hero Killer a lesson while we're at it."

"Of course," Kurogiri agrees with an easy nod.

"Good. Be careful you don't become more trouble than you're worth."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Tomura doesn't fucking trust it. If the traitor did one good thing in his worthless existence, it was to open Tomura's eyes. Life isn't a cooperative game. Friendly fire is on. People are to be used, not *trusted.* He scrapes grime out from under his nails absently.

Chapter End Notes

Izuku: *doom and angst*
Tokoyami: *poetry and darkness*
Aoyama: *winks and sparkles*
Mei: *cackles and chaos*
Yaoyorozu: …What am I doing here?

Dr. Shinsou: I'm going to miss you.
Hitoshi: Ew, I can't believe you just admitted that. How embarrassing for you. Could never be me.

Tomura: Do you ever look at someone and wonder what's going on inside their head?
Kurogiri: *dreams of retirement, a beach vacation where he doesn't have to worry about his Stupid Kids*

Me in December: Wow, Erasure was so long! Definitely the longest chapter I'll ever write
Me in April: Wow, Half-Cold Half-Hot was so long! Definitely the longest chapter I'll ever write
Me now: Wow, Brainwashing was so long! Definitely the longest chapter I'll ever---
I am sniped by my future self from 500 meters away

Next chapter: Bloodcurdle – Part I

Bloodcurdle - Part I

Chapter Notes

> Did I say updates would be on Wednesdays??? I meant, uhhhhhh,,,, whenever I get around to it. Anyway, IGG is over a year old, have some cats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Outside the windows, the sun is barely a violet smudge around the edges of campus. In comparison, the fluorescent lights of the classroom seem too bright and too harsh, hot orange behind Katsuki's eyelids each time he blinks. He sits in Pinky's chair as she sits on the desk's top, chattering away. Her voice weaves together with Kirishima's, Pikachu's, and Elbows' to create a background drone, kind of like waves on a beach, if the ocean evoked an irate Pavlovian response. Katsuki leans back in his seat, eyes heavy lidded.

He's fucking exhausted. Most of the class is, their anticipatory energy for the beginning of internships noticeably tempered by the early hour. Which is for the best – Katsuki doesn't think he could handle the full force of their yelling this morning. Not that it's all that early for him. Unlike these lazy-ass extras, he's always up at this hour, but he slept like shit last night.

Deku sits on the other side of the room, head resting on his desk, pillowed on his folded arms. He smiles blearily at something Sparkles says. Katsuki pulls his eyes away for at least the fourth time this morning, staring instead at the unfettered tilt of Kirishima's grin.

Katsuki's not the only one avoiding looking at Deku.

No, he reminds himself. Not Deku, Midoriya. He's got to knock it off with the demeaning nicknames. All he's doing is reinforcing the same bullshit thought patterns that he's been pacing his way through for the last decade. That's what Hound Dog says, anyway, and as much as Katsuki despises the man, he can still acknowledge a good point when it's slapping him in the fucking face.

So Midoriya it is. Midoriya is a fine name, a neutral one. Neither a villain nor a childhood friend. Katsuki can stand to call him that.

The *point* is, plenty of the class is avoiding looking at Midoriya, either pretending his seat is empty altogether, or darting him only occasional

glances out of the corners of their eyes. It is so different than the way it was before, when everyone stared at him and gravitated into his space with relentless curiosity. Katsuki had resented that behavior so much, but this is really no better. At least that little group of extras Midoriya gathered seems to have stuck around.

“In or out, Shinsou,” Hobo-Sensei says from the front of the room, where he slumps against the wall behind his desk, cocooned in that horrendous sleeping bag. “You’re blocking the door.” His voice easily reaches the class even without being raised. Katsuki’s quirk makes him halfway deaf more often than not, but he thinks he’d still be able to hear Hobo-Sensei over the tinnitus, over the goddamned end of the world, even. That’s how well the guy has them trained.

“Shinsou,” Midoriya calls out, raspy and tired in a way that is both unnatural and a nice change of pace. “Good morning.”

Eyebags hunches his shoulders up around his ears and wrings his hands around the strap of the duffle bag tossed over his shoulder. Too hasty to pass for nonchalant, he raises an oversized thermos to his mouth, hiding the lower half of his face as most of 1-A turns to look at him.

“That’s an oxymoron,” Eyebags mutters flatly as he strides to Midoriya’s desk on his stupid-long legs. He sways awkwardly in place for a moment before folding himself into the empty seat in front of Midoriya’s.

“Guys, this is Shinsou Hitoshi,” Midoriya says. “Shinsou, this is Aoyama Yuga, Yaoyorozu Momo, and Tokoyami Fumikage.” Though he addresses only his friends, Midoriya’s introduction serves the whole class, everyone near silent and watching. Katsuki scoffs under his breath as Ponytail greets Eyebags. Pinky raises a hand to whack against Katsuki’s head like she’s his fucking mother or some bullshit, but he grabs it and tosses it away before she can even get close.

“There’s a stranger in our midst,” Pikachu says, voice lowered for dramatic effect. Kirishima elbows him in the ribs but laughs as he does.

“Why’s he here, do you think?” Pinky wonders. “Maybe I’ll–”

“Sit down,” Katsuki interrupts as she unfolds her legs to stand. “He’s here for a fucking internship, obviously.”

“Obviously?” she echoes, pouting. “But he’s gen ed, isn’t he? How’d he

get an internship, huh? I want *answers*, Bakugou. I will not be silenced!"

"Well, he did win the festival," Kirishima points out. "Maybe that's how."

"Yeah, I was wondering where he disappeared to, actually," Elbows agrees. "Like, Midoriya is…" he hesitates, stuttering. He coughs; Kirishima slaps his back. "He's, uh, awesome and all. But it seems kind of weird that he transferred and Shinsou didn't. Since Midoriya came in third, I mean."

"You know how we solve this mystery? We *ask*. I volunteer as tribute!"

"It's ass o'clock in the morning," Katsuki groans. "Leave the bastard alone, for fuck's sake."

"Some of us have *manners*, Bakugou! It's only polite to say hello!"

Say hello. It would only be laughable if it weren't so fucking annoying, the idea that Pinky would ever settle for a simple greeting when her curiosity is at play. Katsuki grabs the back of her jacket, tethering her to her desk.

"I'm *this close* to getting rid of you for a week, and I'm too fucking tired to deal with you stirring shit up."

"You want to get rid of us?" Pikachu asks, eyes all wide and hurt as he presses a wounded hand over his heart.

"*Yes*."

"Don't listen to him," Elbows says, patting Pikachu on the shoulder. "He loves us, really; he's just a tsundere."

"Ex-*fucking*-cuse me?" Katsuki snaps. Pinky is forced to lean sharply to the side, shimmying to the edge of her desk as Katsuki lets her go, only to slams his hands down hard on the desk's top. "You want to say that to my face, fucker?"

Elbows meets his eyes, no trace of a smirk, but Katsuki can see, clear as day, his intent to be a *fucking bastard*. "Sorry," he says, deadpan. "I know your hearing can be kind of shitty, sometimes. I *said*, you're a tsundere."

“Hope you’re ready for those to be your last words, moron. Because I’m gonna fucking *kill you*.”

“Oh no,” Pinky laments as Katsuki lunges forward. “He was actually a yandere, all along.”

Kirishima hums mournfully. “How could we have been so wrong?”

“A little help here?” Elbows asks frantically, smug composure gratifyingly frayed as he tries to wrap tape around Katsuki’s hands before Katsuki can wrap those hands around his neck.

“Sorry bro,” Pikachu says. “You dug this grave. Rest in pieces.”

“No murder,” Hobo-Sensei interrupts blandly. “If you die now, I’m the one who has to explain why you didn’t show up for your internship.”

Katsuki freezes, one hand fisted in the lapel on Elbows’ jacket, the fingers of his other hand spread wide to keep the tape across his knuckles from binding them together. After a moment, he drops Elbows, tearing the tape from his hand, balling it up, and slapping it onto Elbows’ shoulder. Katsuki wipes the sticky residue from his hand to Elbows’ jacket before shoving him away.

“My hero!” Elbows proclaims to Hobo-Sensei, slumping back against Pikachu’s desk with exaggerated relief. Hobo-Sensei watches, unimpressed.

“Now, if you’re done? Everyone grab your costumes. It’s time to get moving. I’ll take you all to the station, then you’re someone else’s problem for the week.”

“Wow,” Pikachu whispers to Elbows as the class swarms towards the silver cases marked with their seat numbers, “who would have thought that Aizawa-Sensei was a tsundere, too?”

If asked, Hitoshi would have guessed that Present Mic – whose whole image is built on being loud and eccentric and did Hitoshi mention *loud* – was simply incapable of going under the radar, which makes it all the more surprising when the man pops up next to Midoriya’s desk, seemingly out of nowhere, as the students of 1-A move to retrieve

their costumes.

“Hey kiddos!” Yamada greets, making no allowances for the early morning in his tone or volume. Startled, Hitoshi nearly lurches out of his seat. Midoriya, either stoic or exhausted, merely blinks. Yamada continues, “You three will be coming with me. You got your digs, Todoroki?”

A new confusion settles over Hitoshi. Still, he is wondering how the hell he managed to miss that *hair*, and now, on top of that, *you three* echoes around his head. It’s early, and of course he didn’t sleep, and he’s under caffeinated on top of all that, and Hitoshi is feeling a bit like Yamada is speaking a different language, not Japanese, or even English.

“Three?” he asks aloud, eyes settling behind Midoriya. Todoroki Shouto stares back at him, impressively expressionless, meeting Hitoshi’s eyes for a too-long moment before turning to Yamada and nodding once.

“Oh, right,” Midoriya says, smiling sheepishly as he tugs at a curl behind his ear. “Sh-Shinsou, this is Todoroki Shouto. Shouto, Shinsou H-Hitoshi. Shouto will be interning with us – or, well, with Mic, actually, not Eraser, but uh, we’ll all be t-together a lot of the time.”

It’s news to Hitoshi. As far as he knew, the whole internship plan was supposed to be him, Midoriya, and Aizawa. Not Yamada, and definitely not the son of the number two hero.

“Yeah, I know who he is,” Hitoshi says dryly.

Even though he washed out of the sports festival in only the second round, Todoroki’s name has been everywhere. Of course it has been, with a legacy like that, with a *quirk* like that. Hitoshi bites his tongue on a million other things he could say. He’s trying this new thing – it’s called exercising self-control and being civil. He hopes Midoriya appreciates the effort, but it doesn’t seem like it, if the small frown on his face is anything to go by. Hitoshi crosses his arms over his chest, looking to Yamada as the man claps his hands together.

“Alright! Now that everybody knows everybody, let’s get moving, yeah? Follow me!” Yamada herds the three of them up like ducklings, bustling them out of the classroom and leading them through the school, walking backwards as he does. Without looking, he dodges smoothly around another staff member, gesturing expansively as he says, “We’ll get you set up in the apartment while Sho is out. It might

be a tad bit cramped with all five of us – one of you will have to sleep on the couch, but it's comfortable enough for it, cross my heart."

Todoroki speaks up for the first time, interrupting Yamada to ask, "Are you and Aizawa-Sensei together?"

Yamada doesn't miss a beat as he responds, "Of course not! Sho is on his way to the station with the rest of your class and I'm right here, silly."

"I meant together as in in a relationship."

"What gave you that idea?"

"He tolerates you," Todoroki says bluntly, "even though you seem like the type of person who would annoy him. You have a nickname for him. You share an apartment."

"Wow! Very observant!"

Todoroki frowns. "Not really. You didn't answer my question."

Yamada winks.

"Is Izuku your son?"

Hitoshi can't help but gape at Todoroki, incredulous. He doesn't know if it's admirable or cringe-worthy, the way Todoroki asks so deadpan, then waits patiently for an answer while Midoriya sputters and Yamada laughs.

"No!" Midoriya strangles out, red in the face.

Simultaneously, Yamada says, "Sure!"

Todoroki nods resolutely. "I knew it."

"No," Midoriya insists, rushing to walk ahead of Todoroki so he can command his full attention. "I already told you, *no.* Eraser isn't my d-dad; neither is Mic. I just – I just live with them."

"Forsaken by my own son!" Yamada cries, dramatically stumbling, as if his legs have grown too weak to support him.

Midoriya ducks his head down, away from Yamada's grasping hands. Though his expression has barely changed, something about Todoroki screams of smug satisfaction. The corner of Hitoshi's mouth twitches,

a laugh caught somewhere in his chest, caged by confusion and sheer absurdity. Yamada recovers enough to guide them across campus, but continues shooting Midoriya periodic, mournful-eyed looks that Midoriya stubbornly ignores, though his flush has baked into his skin like a sunburn.

Soon enough, they reach the staff apartments, a nondescript building that Hitoshi can't help but stare around. There is nothing of note to see in the halls, just plain walls and labeled doors, no signs of who lives inside, but a strange curiosity drives him to look, anyway, peering around corners. It is always odd to think of teachers having lives outside their classrooms, especially at UA. Hitoshi knows, of course, that his teachers are heroes, but sometimes that makes it all the easier to forget that they are also just *people.*

"Here we are!" Yamada announces outside a door on the second floor. "Make yourselves at home!"

The apartment on the other side is – well, it's a normal apartment. Larger and brighter than the one Hitoshi shares with his father, with an open kitchen and a wide window, lined with plants. There is absolutely nothing exciting or spectacular about the space, and while Hitoshi can't say what he was expecting, he can say he's a bit disappointed.

"I'll take the couch," Todoroki decides after a brief glance around. "I'm shorter."

Hitoshi bristles. He could sleep on the couch if he wanted to. It's not as if he's *too tall* or anything like that, and he doesn't need Todoroki doing him any favors. Midoriya nudges his elbow into Hitoshi's side, raising his asymmetrical eyebrows like he knows exactly what Hitoshi is thinking.

"The spare futon is set up in m-my room," Midoriya says. "I hope that's okay."

"It's fine," Hitoshi says, following Midoriya down the hallway.

"I can give you guys a quick tour later, but for now, this is us. You can drop your stuff wherever."

Hitoshi enters the bedroom, prepared to leave his bag against the wall and hightail it out of Midoriya's personal space, but his plan changes only a step past the doorway. He freezes in place, gripping the strap of his duffle bag.

“You didn’t tell me you have a cat.”

“That’s Lucy.” There’s a funny twist to Midoriya’s voice, like he might be laughing, but Hitoshi can’t tear his eyes off the massive ball of white fluff on the bed to confirm. “He usually sleeps in here. I hope you like cats.”

“Midoriya,” Hitoshi says with newfound sincerity. “I fucking *love* cats.”

Now Midoriya is definitely laughing, but Hitoshi can’t bring himself to care. He drops his bag – in the middle of the floor, like an animal, but he’s got other priorities right now – creeping closer as he hisses the *pspsps* noise through his teeth that all cats love. Lucy, curled up in a tight ball near Midoriya’s pillows, doesn’t respond. Waking a sleeping cat just to demand its attention is a pretty selfish thing, Hitoshi knows. He would go as far as to say it might even be evil – but if that’s true, then this may very well be his villain origin story, given how much he really, *really* wants to pet this cat.

“He’s deaf,” Midoriya informs, amusement obvious in the way his voice quakes. “He’ll spook if you wake him. But good news – we have two more.”

Hitoshi jolts upright, spine stiff and straight as he turns to face Midoriya. Hitoshi looks down at him sternly, ignoring the way Midoriya purses his lips around his smile, the way his eyes are shining. It’s not a laughing matter, really, these three secret cats, and Midoriya has no business acting cute about the whole business.

“You have *three cats*. And you never *told me?”*

Midoriya once again loses his fight against laughter, sagging back against the wall of his room as he presses his fist against his mouth. Realizing that Midoriya has no plans to make himself useful anytime soon, Hitoshi strides back to the living room, ignoring Todoroki on the couch to address Yamada.

“Where are the cats?” he demands, probably too short to be polite, but he’s got *other priorities* right now.

Yamada looks caught off guard for a fraction of a second before his face splits in a wicked smile. He clears his throat. “Can I get a yeah?” he calls, voice easily reaching all ends of the apartment. Immediately, a meow bounces back from the vicinity of the kitchen, and a moment later, an ungodly noise – that could maybe be called a meow, if

someone was feeling very generous and had never actually interacted with a cat in their life – echoes down the hallway.

Yamada ducks behind the counter and pops back up with the kitchen cat in his hands. He hoists the animal up over his head, holding it under its front legs for just a moment before it twists around in his grip and demands release. Back on the floor, the cat slinks quickly out of the kitchen, yellow-green eyes cautiously fixed on Hitoshi and Todoroki as it hops up onto a stool and starts to groom itself. The cat is big, thin but long with short white fur and a handful pale grey spots. And also definitely a boy.

“That’s Disco,” Midoriya says, having returned to the living room at some point.

“He’s perfect,” Hitoshi declares.

“The last one, Bast, she’s in her nest. You, uh, don’t want to bother her. She bites. A lot.”

Hitoshi looks away from Disco, first at Midoriya, then down the hallway. “We’re going to be best friends,” he decides.

Yamada barks a short laugh. “Good luck with that one, listener. Later though, alright? We don’t have time right now to clean blood out of the carpet – we’ve got an appointment at the support studio. If everyone’s got their stuff settled, let’s get a move on!”

As Yamada marches the group back out of the apartment, Hitoshi takes a moment to stare pointedly down the hallway, making a silent vow to himself. Learning about heroics and developing skills during internships is all well and good, but Hitoshi has a personal goal to fulfill before the week is out – he’ll make that demon in the hallway love him, even if it’s the last thing he does.

When Mic slides the reinforced door of the support studio open, they are greeted by the pop-fizzle of an electrical short and a loud cry of “Pen Boy!”

Mic dodges to the side as Mei bounds across the classroom, dreads bouncing with her enthusiasm. She seizes Izuku by both wrists to drag

him bodily into the room, ignoring his companions entirely as she manhandles him with impressive strength, forcing him into a seat in front of a cluttered workspace that very obviously belongs to Mei, based on the chaotic spread of gadgets and schematics across the table.

“Sorry,” Maijima-Sensei says aside to Mic, who has emerged from cover now that Mei has absconded with Izuku. “I made the mistake of mentioning that we would have guests this week. She’s been… excited.”

“No mistake!” Mei refutes, tongue pinched between her teeth as she digs through the materials on her desk. She shoves a hunk of metal into Izuku’s lap, a cube of intricate plates and inexplicable wires. “Hold that,” she orders, then resumes talking to her teacher, “If you hadn’t said anything, I wouldn’t have known to get here early today, and then it would have taken even longer for Pen Boy to get his stuff. I’ve been waiting very patiently, you know, and I have a lot of ideas that we need to go over – AHA!” Cutting herself off midsentence, Mei holds up something small and silver and runs through a door at the back of the room with it, shouting as she goes, “Be right back!”

Everyone stares after her for a long, silent moment. Then, Mic shrugs and claps his hands together. “Loving the energy! Take a seat, boys, make yourselves comfortable. Shouta will be joining you as soon as he’s back, but until then – explore, brainstorm. Support technicians are the backbone of the hero industry, and good gear saves lives. Now, I’ve got a homeroom to teach. Behave!”

With a jaunty wave and grin, Mic ducks out of the room, narrowly avoiding an early support student who looks after him with a blankly baffled stare before shaking their head. Shouto tips his head fractionally to the side but doesn’t otherwise react or hesitate as he pulls a spare chair from its spot against the wall to Mei’s workspace, sitting next to Izuku and glancing over the mechanical carnage with vague curiosity. Shinsou stands in the doorway for a moment longer, shoulders shrugged up and hands shoved into his pockets until the early student clears their throat and skirts around him to get to their own desk.

“So these are the babysitting arrangements, huh?” Shinsou asks dryly, stealing Mei’s seat rather than pull up a new one. Izuku eyes him carefully, but despite his words and bland tone of voice, Shinsou doesn’t actually look particularly put out.

“They’ve still got c-classes to teach,” Izuku points out. “It’s why UA teachers usually don’t take interns. And Mic was right about s-support technicians. It’s a good, uh, d-dialog to establish.” Realizing he has been fidgeting with the strange device Mei gave him, tugging at some of the protruding wires and slipping his fingers beneath them, Izuku passes the cube to Shouto who takes it with a minute raising of his eyebrows, turning it around carefully between his palms. Izuku thinks he looks interested, but he could just be bored – it’s hard to tell with Shouto.

“I don’t know the first thing about the support industry,” Shinsou says, eyeing the device with a great deal of skepticism.

“Then you’re in the right place!” Mei says, bursting out of the backroom with her arms stacked full.

She staggers over, head craned up to barely see over everything she is carrying. Hastily, Izuku clears an empty space on the table, shoving a bundle of tools to the side moments before Mei dumps her burden. He winces as a screwdriver and several unidentifiable odds and ends roll off the edge of the table and clatter to the floor. Through the noise, Mei rests her fists on her hips with a victorious grin. Abruptly, her eyes narrow, and she looks between Shouto and Shinsou like she is only just noticing them.

“We haven’t met. I’m Hatsume Mei, future CEO of Hatsume Industries, current student support technician of Pen Boy, here. And you, Mr. First Place.”

“Me?” Shinsou asks. Mei ignores him.

“Peppermint’s technician is Machi Shigeru. I’ve decided he’s my enemy, on account of how terrible your costume is.”

“Hatsume!” a classmate calls in half-hearted protest from across the room.

“What’s wrong with it?” Shouto asks.

Izuku cringes slightly as Mei answers, immediately and at length. Shinsou’s face screws up oddly just a sentence or two into her rant and Izuku hesitantly nudges his ankle.

“She’s–” Izuku begins, only to realize that he doesn’t quite know how to put words to Mei. “Well, she’s nice. Or, uh, she’s cool? She’s a genius, just a b-bit–”

“Eccentric?” Shinsou offers, in that flat way that makes it hard to tell whether he means it as a good thing or a bad thing, or if he even cares at all. Izuku smiles sheepishly and nods. Shinsou shrugs, deceptively careless given that Izuku has come to know that Shinsou is generally trying very, *very* hard, no matter what façade he puts on to the contrary.

“What is all this stuff, anyway?” Shinsou questions, reaching out to drag the largest item – a bulky silver case – towards him by the handle. He drops it with a flinch when Mei squeals, leaning over them to grab the case and flicks open the latches holding it closed.

“Pen Boy! I have been waiting so long for this, and even though you’ve barely come down here at all–”

“I have *class,* Mei.”

“–I’ve decided to forgive you for that, mostly because I want to see what you think of everything. I also had some ideas which you’ve *got* to like, and I think we should probably revisit some things–”

“I don’t need a jetpack.”

“You say that *now*.”

“This is my costume, then?” Izuku asks, abandoning the jetpack topic before Mei can start another tirade on it.

“Your very boring costume, yes,” she confirms. From anyone else, the words may have sounded petulant or scathing, but Mei’s excitement is so clear and infectious, her smile so wide and eyes so intent, that the criticism hardly registers.

One half of the bottom half of the case, when Izuku flips the lid up, is filled with precisely folded fabric. The other half of the bottom, as well as the entire top, is taken up by various weapons and accessories, carefully slotted into place with an efficiency that almost makes it seem as if the case must be bigger on the inside. Shinsou whistles lowly as he peaks over Izuku’s arm.

“That’s a lot of knives,” he observes.

“Why do you need knives?” Shouto asks. “Couldn’t you just use a–”

Izuku interrupts, “You n-never know when you could use a good ol’ fashioned kni-knife.”

A quirk, Izuku is sure Shouto was going to say.

The knowledge is accompanied by a sick little twist in Izuku's stomach – so many quirks, all *stolen*, and now everybody *knows,* knows exactly what Izuku *is* – and a much larger bubble of warmth in Izuku's chest. There is no judgement in Shouto's voice. Just indifferent curiosity. It's a fair enough question, since Izuku has at least a dozen ways to cut or stab just about anything he could possibly want to – and Shouto, as far as Izuku can tell, couldn't care less.

Of course, Mei still has no idea about the truth of things. As far as she's concerned, Izuku has a joint pyrokinesis-fire breathing quirk, powerful and promising, but completely natural. He's not eager for her to learn the truth. Though, mouth wobbling around a disbelieving smile, Izuku admits that it's not because he's afraid of her hating him. He's afraid to tell her, definitely, but only because he knows she would be all too excited.

His eyes are wet as he carefully pinches the fabric of his new costume between his fingers, rubbing them over the thick-but-flexible material.

"This is amazing, Mei," he breathes, with a heavy sincerity that goes completely over her head. Shinsou eyes him apprehensively, likely having had enough of Izuku's tears to last him a lifetime. With an apologetic smile, Izuku presses the hem of his sleeve under his eyes to dry his waterline.

"Of course it is," Mei boasts. "It's not like you gave me a *challenge*."

"I know, I'm very boring. I'm sorry for stifling your creativity."

"You should be. You're better than Mr. First Place, at least."

"Are you talking about me?" Shinsou asks, tone slightly sharp at the second use of the nickname.

"Duh! You came in first, didn't you?"

Shinsou stares at Mei with narrowed eyes, mouth twisting in a way that Izuku recognizes as a red flag. Izuku stares at Shinsou hard, willing him not to pick a fight – not with Mei, of all people. Knowing her, she would wind him up further and further while remaining peacefully oblivious. She wouldn't even need to fight back to leave Shinsou completely destroyed, just like she did to Iida during the sports festival. Something must read clearly in Izuku's face because Shinsou meets his eyes and grimaces. He sets his jaw, stubborn and

defensive but silent.

“Fine,” he says shortly after a tense second. “So that’s Midoriya’s stuff. What’s all this other junk?”

Izuku bites back a groan.

“My babies aren’t junk!” Mei exclaims, slapping her hands down onto her worktable before pulling some of her gadgets protectively into her arms. She glares over them at Shinsou, who stares back, looking tired and bored, as if he isn’t purposefully being an asshole. As if he didn’t intentionally find a spot he could prod that she would actually notice.

He plucks a long, thin stick of metal and rubber off the table, holding it in front of squinted eyes. “My bad. Honest mistake.”

Mei lunges forward to grab the stick from his hand, flipping it around in her palm so she can jab the pronged metal end into Shinsou’s wrist. He jerks backwards, nearly falling out of his seat as he tumbles into Izuku, all flailing limbs and sharp elbows. Izuku reaches past him to intercept Mei before she can do any damage. Izuku has no idea what the little rod does, but knowing Mei it would electrocute Shinsou, or make him explode, or worse. Admittedly, Izuku is half tempted to let her, but he knows it would only make the week harder for all of them.

“A-alrighty then!” Izuku says loudly, forcing a laugh. “Shinsou’s just j-joking, Mei. R-right, Shinsou?”

“Right,” Shinsou agrees immediately, nearly knocking his skull against Izuku’s as he nods.

Mei blinks, then breaks into uproarious laughter. Several students who have filed into the room glance in her direction, looking away after only a brief moment, already desensitized. Izuku uses his shoulder to nudge a pale Shinsou back into his seat.

“Oh, that was funny,” Mei says, wiping her eyes as she calms down. “Good thing you were joking. If you weren’t, it would have been weird to give you the babies I have for you, you know? And that would just be sad. I mean, they *are* a little boring, but they’re also *my* babies, so they’re still super cute.”

“You have, uh, babies? For me?” Shinsou shoots Izuku an inquisitive look out of the corner of his eye. Izuku just shrugs. Besides him, Shouto, who has been watching the whole exchange like a tennis match, mimics the gesture.

“Of course! I *did* mention that I was your student technician, didn’t I? Oh, well – I’m your student support technician. I’ve always got ideas for more babies, so after the sports festival, I volunteered to take you both on top of the students I was assigned at the beginning of the year. I don’t really have a complete load out for you, yet, since you haven’t given me much to work with,” she gives Shinsou a scolding look, “but I’ve put together some basics. Like I said, *super boring*.” Perking up, she adds, “But I have ideas for more!”

She collects a few things from around the table, pressing them into Shinsou’s arms with a gleefully expectant smile, like she hadn’t tried to stab him with a mysterious object just a minute ago. Shinsou stares at the pile in his lap, mostly clothing, similar to the carefully assembled ensemble in front of Izuku, but less detailed. Shinsho unwinds a long, steely grey strip of fabric from the bundle.

“This is…”

“It’s a simplified version of mine,” Eraser says from the doorway of the classroom. “Not as advanced, but it will do for learning. Don’t expect it to be easy.”

“I wouldn’t trust it if it was,” Shinsou says softly. He wraps the capture weapon around both of his palms, stretching it between them, face slack with a reverence that he doesn’t bother trying to disguise.

They are all polite enough to pretend they don’t notice. Shouto asks Mei a question about his costume, launching her into another rant. Eraser crosses the room to inspect Izuku’s gear, pulling a knife from the case with a flat look and a resigned sigh.

Snapping the case containing Izuku’s costume shut – it is labeled with a bold, black *19*, Izuku notices now – Eraser addresses the three of them. And as Maijima-Sensei calls his homeroom to a start, their internship officially begins.

This is good, isn’t it?

Not perfect, no. Bakugou Katsuki is still angry. Midoriya Izuku is still struggling. Shinsou Hitoshi is, as he would be the first to tell you, still a bit of an asshole. But they’re learning – they’re all better than they

were before. They're not perfect, but then again, nothing ever is.

Good can be good enough, can't it?

Oh… But you're overlooking something.

Law and Ethics is a third-year heroics course taught by Aizawa Shouta. It's the most important class he teaches. He regularly petitions to make it mandatory all three years. Not that it would help much, in this case. This isn't really the kind of law you break. It's the kind that breaks you. You just have to hope you can put the pieces back together.

Murphy's Law.

Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Chapter End Notes

Bakugou: I'm going to kill you! *scribbles on Sero's whiteboard*
Bakugou: I'm going to kill you! *sticks tape to Sero's jacket*
Sero: You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.

Izuku: Eraser and Mic aren't my dads!
Mic: Oh, the rejection! I think… my heart may be breaking… everything is going dark…
Izuku: No it isn't!
Mic: It is too, Izuku, the same thing happened yesterday.

Hitoshi, trying not to be an asshole: Am I doing this right?
Izuku: A for effort!
Izuku: …C- for execution.

Next chapter: Bloodcurdle - Part II

Bloodcurdle - Part II

Chapter Notes

> CWs for discussion of abuse – nothing particularly graphic, but there are more details in the end notes if you need them!
>
> You know what, have some memes. This isn't going to be everything from the server, sorry for whatever I'm sure I'm missing, it's been too long
> Bevvedout: X
> Caet: X
> Dev: X
> Eggs: X X
> Fishy: X
> Henry: X
> Snowy: X X X X X X
> Surya: X X X X X X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One would think that it would be easy to manage three teenagers, especially if one had regular practice herding unruly swarms of twenty hero students. One would be wrong, and Shouta would give them a very nasty look if they tried to introduce any further logic into the situation. Rule one of teaching: teenagers never make any sense. They are illogical and irrational, and Shouta can't wait to retire.

Izuku stands in front of him, practically vibrating with excitement despite the slightly glassy and overwhelmed look in his eyes. Next to him, Shinsou slouches with forced nonchalance, trying admirably to disguise his own childish enthusiasm as he toys with the end of the capture weapon he has looped around his neck in a mirror of Shouta's own. Without a doubt, Hizashi will be mocking Shouta for that resemblance as soon as he notices it. At the end of the line, Todoroki watches with patient and attentive stoicism, achieving Shinsou's desired impassivity with little to no effort.

Shouta scans them over, paying special attention to Izuku and Shinsou, since this is the first test for their costumes. Shinsou's sleeves, Shouta notices, are too short, riding an inch or so up his wrists. It'll be an easy enough fix when the boy actually gets a full, customized design, rather than the generic time-crunched gear they're making due with for the moment, though Shinsou's costume will likely have to go

through several iterations just to keep up with the rate at which he's growing. In contrast, Izuku is much more tailored and polished, sleekly outfitted in blacks and dark greens, with sparing pops of reds, and kitted up with all manner of gear and gadgets that sprang into reality from the unholy matrimony of Izuku's imagination and Hatsume's hands.

"How's it all feel?" Shouta asks. "The fit's good?"

Izuku nods exuberantly. Shinsou stretches his arms in front of him, eying the knobs of his wrists with bland distaste before he shrugs and nods as well. Instead of focusing on himself, Shinsou darts small side-eyed glances at Izuku. Shouta sighs and makes an internal note to keep a close eye on Shinsou's responses to his gear, since the kid seems content to tolerate small discomforts rather than report them.

"Okay, wait a second," Shinsou blurts. Shouta hopes for a moment that he's planning to speak up, but then, "Are those *bunny ears?"* Shouta rolls his eyes.

"Ummm, yes?" Izuku replies, his hesitant doubt making the confirmation into a question. He reaches up to tug at one of the ears, bending the flexible plastic or rubber or whatever it's made of back down towards the band of the intricate headset that's nestled into his curls. The ear, nearly a perfect color match to Izuku's hair, springs back up when he releases it and Shinsou's brows crease together in an almost offended expression.

"Why do you have *bunny ears?*"

Flushing, Izuku grabs both of them and flattens them to his head, pinned under his palms. "I just – I thought they'd be c-cute!" he defends, worrying his lip with his teeth. "And make me look, I d-don't know, friendly. I don't want to s-scare the people I'm meant to be s-saving."

Shinsou gives Izuku a dubious look, as if the mere thought of him *scaring* someone is absurd. Like this, with Izuku red in the face, flustered and uncertain, the idea that he could be anything other than harmless does seem ridiculous, but Shouta knows better. Shinsou does, too, for that matter, but he sometimes seems to entirely forget. The rabbit ears – while an *interesting* choice, to say the least – are, in Shouta's opinion, a wise addition. Izuku's costume lacks any of the dramatic design flairs typical of limelight heroics, the unnecessary colors and quirks that are more for publicity than practicality. Shouta

knows from experience that the dark colors and utilitarian designs favored by underground heroes can be distressing to victims in the field, especially when they're paired with intense auras like the one Izuku tends to put out when he's focused.

"They're st-stupid, aren't they?" Izuku asks, suddenly frowning at the red laces of his boots, a self-deprecating scowl that makes Shouta's fingers itch. "I'll have to get Mei to t-take them out of the next design if I want people to take me s-seriously. We'll need to move some of the electronics, but–"

"They're cute," Todoroki says simply, interrupting Izuku's muttering before it can really gain steam. Shinsou shoots him a look that is caught halfway between gratitude and irritation as Izuku sags in relief.

"Alright," Shouta says, resolutely ignoring whatever adolescent bullshit Shinsou is pouting about, wishing he could be as oblivious to it as Todoroki and Izuku seem to be. "I have a couple of tests planned." Shouta sighs beneath the brunt of the boys' attention, waving a resigned hand. "Izuku, tell them about the tests."

Face splitting into a grin, Izuku bounces up onto his toes, pulling his notebook from – Shouta's not sure, actually; he suspects there may be quirk use involved. Afterall, the bands keeping Izuku's quirk suppressed were removed earlier that morning, secured in an inner pocket of Shouta's jumpsuit, where they're intended to stay until the end of internships. Or maybe one of the many pockets on Izuku's belt and pants is actually a Hatsume-made pocket dimension. All things considered, that seems equally as likely as quirk use, actually.

"Right!" Izuku begins. He takes off at a breakneck pace, "Well, Shouto, you've said that you can't control your fire, and it makes sense that your control would be lacking, since you haven't had much practice with it, but considering your, uh – relationship? With, well, with *all that*, I was thinking that your difficulty might be just as much, maybe even more, about mental discipline as physical–"

"Psychosomatic quirk dysfunction," Shinsou says, mouth pulled wryly to the side. He doesn't seem to realize he has spoken at all until Izuku whirls on him. Surprised, Shinsou falters momentarily before scowling and moving to tuck his hands into his pockets that don't exist on his costume. Impacts of psychology on quirk function is Shinsou Toshiyuki's main area of study, Shouta remembers.

“Exactly!” Izuku confirms, snapping his fingers. “So, I was thinking that you, Shinsou, might be able to help!”

“Me?” Shinsou echoes, awkwardly folding his hands together behind his back in lieu of pockets. Looking down at himself, he raises his eyebrows, as if to assess just how helpful he is feeling and finding himself very *un*helpful, indeed.

“Yes! Remember your quirk apprehension test? When you made me throw that ball for you?” Despite Izuku’s enthusiasm, the complete lack of censure in his voice – or perhaps because of it – Shinsou grimaces at the reminder. “I never would have thrown that hard on my own. You brought out my potential.”

“I strained a muscle in your shoulder,” Shinsou points out flatly.

“Well, sure, but that’s not the point. The *point* is that you overwrote my internalized inhibitions.”

“Those inhibitions were there for a reason, Midoriya.”

Izuku waves him off. “No, that’s not – that’s semantics. *The point is* that your quirk might be able to help us identify what Shouto is capable of without his own thoughts in the way. And as long as you add something like, um, like ‘without hurting yourself,’ something like that, then he’ll be fine! You’ll both get the practice you need, and we might figure out more of the mechanics behind your quirks, *and* the information will help us structure our training for the rest of the week.”

“And what’ll you be doing during all this?”

“Analyzing, obviously,” Izuku says, tapping the open page of his notebook with the butt of his pencil. He spins it between his fingers, bringing it up to catch the end between his teeth as some of his excitement eddies into an anxious tension. “And, uh – I’m meant to pay attention, to see if I can f-figure anything out about my o-own q-quirk.”

When Izuku flickers nervous eyes in Shouta’s direction, Shouta nods once, half in support and half in approval. Some anxiety is to be expected, asking Izuku to explore his quirk, but Shouta has to admit that he’s pleased with how well the kid is handling the prospect. No arguments, no breakdowns – just nerves, and even then not nearly enough to dull Izuku’s determination.

At the mention of Izuku's quirk, Shinsou concedes immediately, dropping all the other arguments he certainly had queued up to give Izuku a hard time. Todoroki, on the other hand, tilts his head, a spark of curiosity animating him from the still and seemingly indifferent patience he had been projecting.

"What are you trying to figure out?" he asks, not bothering with tact.

Tired professionalism is all that keeps Shouta from laughing aloud at the look that spreads over Shinsou's face, aghast and scandalized, as if Todoroki has broken some kind of taboo by daring to do anything other than conspicuously ignore the elephant in the room. Izuku rubs the back of his neck and bites out a nonsensical chain of half-words, fidgeting with his fingers. Eventually he shrugs sheepishly, his smile strained. Hopefully, by the end of the week, Shinsou will have outgrown the stumbling caginess that overcomes him about the topic. Izuku, too, will hopefully outgrow his reflexive response to shamefully deflect.

Todoroki narrows his eyes. Shinsou, eyes wide, looks back and forth between Todoroki and Izuku before staring beseechingly at Shouta, as if expecting him to intervene.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Shouta wonders how he is meant to handle an entire week of this.

At the end of a long day of training, Izuku slumps on the floor of the living room, muscles feeling like overcooked pasta – warm and limp. Most of his weight is leaning against Mic's leg, temple resting against the hero's knee, one arm curled around behind one of his ankles. Tired heat pulses up and down Izuku's body, like he is laying on the beach with the surf washing over sun-heated skin in lazy waves.

Shouto sits on the couch. He'd almost pass for put together, if not for the increasing frizziness of his hair. An hour ago, they'd all been dripping with sweat, and while they rinsed the worst of it off in the gym showers, Shouto's hair is apparently quite unruly under the wrong conditions. Idly, Izuku notices that half of Shouto's hair – specifically the white half – has dried in messy waves.

A groan rises from the ground.

“Oh good,” Izuku sighs, pressing his head harder against Mic’s knee. “I thought you were dead.”

“Are you sure I’m not?” Shinsou replies, voice muffled by the carpet. He lays face down, limbs splayed at careless angles, one leg shoved under the coffee table. “Oh shit,” he says, turning his head to the side so his face is no longer squished into the floor. Blood beads along his upper lip. “I think I got blood on your carpet. Sorry.”

Eraser sighs, deep, like it’s coming all the way from the tips of his toes. “Wouldn’t be the first time,” he dismisses, dragging himself off the couch and into the kitchen. He comes back with a wad of paper towels and passes them down to Shinsou, who promptly shoves them under his nose.

After a moment, Shinsou breaks the silence again. “Did something just bite me?”

Izuku glances over. “Ah, yeah. That’s Bast. I *did* warn you.”

“That’s fine, then. She’s allowed to bite me. She deserves it.”

“*What* did you just call my cat?” Eraser demands, words clipped.

Izuku blinks. “Uh.”

“Come on, Sho, it’s just a nickname,” Mic says, stifling laughter as he ruffles a hand through Izuku’s hair. At the end of such a long day, when Izuku is completely wrung out, in a way that is just as uncomfortable as it is satisfying, Izuku can’t help but lean into the touch. His eyes fall halfway closed as Eraser huffs.

“Her name is *Bastard*,” Eraser insists. The cat in question responds with half a growl, the stunted end of her tail flicking violently at the air for a moment before she jumps in a high arch and lands on Shinsou’s back, probably with her claws out, if his hissed exhale is anything to go by.

Izuku mutters his defense, “She’s a goddess.”

Above him, Mic barks a laugh, tugging at Izuku’s hair just enough to shake his head a little. “You just don’t want to say a bad word,” he teases. Izuku pulls away and swats Mic’s hand with his own, nearly toppling over into Shinsou as he forgets to account for the overcooked noodle quality of his limbs until a moment too late.

“It just seems mean, is all,” Izuku argues halfheartedly. Bast – Bast*ard* – she’s just a little, old, half-feral cat that’s doing her best and mostly doesn’t really hurt anyone. At least not permanently. He doesn’t see why he should call her names – even if that name is, well. *Her* name. Still, it seems like the kind of thing that could give a person – cat? – a complex. Maybe that’s why she acts out all the time.

Shinsou, having propped himself up onto his elbows, tries to twist his head around to get a look at the cat still stubbornly clinging to his shirt with her claws. She hops away from him when he starts to roll over, throwing herself over his side in an uncoordinated tangle of limbs and landing in Izuku’s lap claws-first. She bites his thumb when he scratches behind her ears, then shoves her head against his hand until he does it again.

“Aw,” Shinsou coos, stuffed up and nasal, “she *is* a Bastard.”

“No,” Izuku denies as she gnaws softly along his palm, prickly but not painful. “She’s – she’s just *rascally,* is all.”

Shinsou snorts. Eraser scoffs. Bastard grumbles.

She twists around in Izuku’s lap, grabbing him by the wrist with her front paws to kick at his arm with her hind legs. She nips his fingers when he wiggles them for her. Shinsou reaches out to pet her, but before he can get within an inch of her fur, she goes rigid and launches herself out of the room and down the hallway. Izuku blinks, surprised by the sudden emptiness of his lap and the new sting in his thighs from where he was used as leverage. Shinsou smirks in Bastard’s wake, staring after with exhausted but steadfast determination. Then, his face scrunches up, mouth falling open in an affronted little gasp.

“What the *fuck*, Todoroki?” he demands, rolling himself up until he’s seated with several unflattering grunts of effort that Izuku very politely ignores.

“What did I do?” Shouto asks.

Izuku’s eyes follow the sharp gesture of Shinsou’s arm, and he immediately breaks into laughter that lights up a hot ache along his ribs and abs. Despite Shouto’s complete lack of interest in the cats – a certain amount of wary distaste, even – Disco has curled quite contentedly into the crook of his right side.

“Life is so fucking unfair.”

“It’s alright,” Izuku consoles, reaching out without thinking to pat Shinsou on the shoulder. “We can get you a hot water bottle or something. Level the playing field.”

Shinsou stares at Izuku for a long moment, some kind of realization dawning behind his eyes as Izuku bites his lip and tries not to laugh in his face. Mouth flattening into a tight line, Shinsou narrows his eyes to slits and points a finger at Izuku, close enough to his face that Izuku’s eyes nearly cross.

“You,” Shinsou says, “are a *little shit*.”

His accusation, heated and low, hangs in the air for a long moment before Eraser absolutely decimates the tension, coughing out a shocked laugh that has Mic following straight after him, nearly descending into hysterics. Izuku joins in, giggling despite his best efforts and leaning back against Mic’s leg as Shinsou stands – bracing himself on the coffee table to keep his balance on shaky knees – and crosses his arms, glowering at them with stern disapproval, which only serves to make Mic laugh that much harder.

“Haha, laugh it up,” Shinsou snarks. “I can really see the family resemblance.” He nudges Izuku’s hip with his foot. “What happened to giving us a tour, huh? Stop laughing and make yourself useful, maybe. I am your *guest*.”

“A-alright, alright,” Izuku agrees, squishing his cheeks between his palms as he rubs the soreness of grinning too wide and too long from his face. He drags himself up by the arm of Mic’s chair, taking Shinsou’s hand when it’s offered for support, though they’re both so strung out from the day’s work that there’s really not much Shinsou could do to help him up. Really, all the gesture does is ensure that Izuku would take Shinsou down with him if he fell.

“Tour, Shouto?” Izuku offers, glancing over to the quiet boy. “We wouldn’t want anyone to get lost.” Of course, given the size of the apartment, the tour is barely a formality. Shinsou snorts under his breath, and Shouto, thankfully, spares a small, slightly awkward smile. It’s a relief, and Izuku relaxes slightly and smiles back, glad that neither Shouto nor Shinsou seem terribly bored or irritated.

Over the last three or so weeks, Izuku and Mic and Eraser have all established a tentative balance here, in this apartment, a rhythm in the way they move around each other. It’s odd, to suddenly have new people in the space, and there’s a strange anxiety to it. A feeling of

intrusion, paired with the pressure to impress or entertain. Shouto separates himself from a disgruntled Disco, standing stiffly, and for a probably too-long moment, that's all the three boys do – stand around and look at each other until Izuku remembers that he has a tour to give.

"Right!" he says, spreading his arms. "Well, uh, this is the living room."

From there, he walks them into the kitchen, opens the fridge to show them the abundance of supplies Mic has prepared for their comfort, introduces them to the little plants of the windowsill – which have all been lovingly named by Mic, and less-lovingly nicknamed by Eraser, who says it's stupid to talk to plants, despite the fact that Izuku has caught him doing it himself. Shouto nods to each plant in solemn greeting. Shinsou seems more interested in the fridge. Izuku leads them on.

"This is–" Izuku pointedly raises his voice, "*Bast's* closet."

"Wait, wait, wait," Shinsou interrupts, disbelieving at first but growing progressively more gleeful. "She has a *closet?*" The way he says it makes it sound like the best thing he has ever heard.

"Yes," Izuku confirms. To demonstrate, he presses the toe of his sneaker to the top of the cat flap installed on the door, opening it a gap. Immediately, Bastard swipes a paw through, stretching up and patting her claws, fully unsheathed, about in a frantic attempt to destroy that which has dared intrude on her territory. "Eraser started feeding her in there when they got Disco," Izuku explains. "To keep her from, you know – attacking him. She got territorial."

Shinsou crouches down, staring intently at the cat flap. "I have never related to a creature more in my life," he declares.

"Sure," Izuku says slowly, though Shinsou's obvious – if atypical – joy is a bit contagious. Catching Izuku's eyes, Shouto looks askance at Shinsou, expression bewildered. Mouth twitching, Izuku shrugs.

"Do you… also bite?" Shouto asks carefully.

"Fuck around and find out," Shinsou responds absentmindedly. Completely occupied with the wonder that is Bastard's closet, he doesn't notice the apprehensive consternation that flickers across Shouto's face as he darts his eyes from Shinsou to Izuku. Shinsou would be so disappointed to miss it, Izuku is sure. Then again, he

would probably be unbearably smug if he noticed.

Shaking his head and moving on, Izuku says, “Bathroom’s right here.” Swallowing uncomfortably, he adds, “So, um, I – I’m not supposed to sh-shut doors? Just m-make sure the light’s off, even if the d-door is cracked. It’s a thing.”

He waves a dismissive hand through the air and forces a laugh, hoping to leave it at that. Izuku doesn’t *mind* the door rule at all – he understands why it might be necessary, and if you ask him, he’s already been granted enough liberties, being allowed to live here and attend UA. That doesn’t mean he wants to *explain* it, though, especially not to his – friends? Classmates, definitely; people he has to interact with on a regular basis. Mercifully, neither of the other boys says anything. If a disconcertingly shaken expression spreads across Shinsou’s face, Izuku is content to pretend he didn’t see it and trust Shinsou to keep whatever he thinks he’s figured out to himself.

Izuku points to the next door down the hall. “That’s Mic and Eraser’s room.”

“They share a room?” Shouto asks, suddenly sharp and intense.

“Yeah, they’re really close friends.” Grinning widely under Shouto’s scrutiny, Izuku pushes the door to his own room open, flicking the light on. “And this is my room.”

With an unexpected and unfamiliar kind of pride, Izuku appraises his bedroom. *This is my room.* His own words loop in his head. For the first time since he moved in, Izuku realizes that this room really has become *his.* There is no longer a guest bedroom in the apartment; Izuku is no longer a guest. His schoolwork is scattered across the desk. Present Mic features prominently in several of the handful of posters on the walls – Mic had found it hilarious, putting merchandise of himself on the walls of his own home. In the absence of similar merchandise for Eraserhead, Mic had enthusiastically collaborated with Izuku to make some of their own, all of rather dubious quality. Izuku’s favorite was a random character figurine they had picked up for cheap and painted mostly black with a long string of grey yarn wrapped around the neck and shoulders. Eraser sighed every time he saw it, long and loud, so Izuku had given it a place of honor on his bedstand.

This was *Izuku’s* room.

“Can I sit?” Shinsou asks, gesturing vaguely to the floor.

“Oh, uh, yeah, of course,” Izuku says, pulling himself from his thoughts and making a mental note to get the futon set up sooner rather than later, considering that Shinsou looks just about dead on his feet.

“Great, fair warning I may never get up again.”

“In that case, make sure to sit somewhere out of the way.”

Huffing a dry laugh, Shinsou lowers himself gingerly to the ground, watching with tired curiosity as Shouto inspects Izuku’s shelves. Izuku tries hard to resist the urge to monitor Shouto’s movements himself, not wanting to hover over the other boy’s shoulder like some kind of overbearing creep.

“Hey Midoriya?” Shinsou says, voice lilting oddly.

“What’s up?” Izuku asks, pulling his eyes away from where Shouto is scanning over the spines of his analysis journals.

“Is this a penis?”

Izuku blinks. A small scrap of blue paper is pinched between two of Shinsou’s fingers. Without prompting, he presses it closer to Izuku’s face so he can see it better. Brows raised high, bags beneath his eyes even deeper than usual, Shinsou’s face is a perfect study in deadpan.

“No!” Izuku blurts after an incriminating pause, face growing very hot very quickly. Darting forward, Izuku grabs Shinsou’s hand and pushes it down, pinning it and the offending piece of confetti to the carpet.

Shinsou’s mouth pulls into a slow smirk. “I know what a penis looks like, Midoriya.”

“Then why did you ask?!”

“Why do you have tiny blue dicks in your carpet?”

“Midnight,” Izuku groans. Shinsou instantly accepts this as the perfect explanation it is, teasing grin transforming into a sympathetic grimace. Not long ago, Eraser had torn into Midnight about the confetti, about how it was haunting their lives and befouling poor, innocent Lucy. Midnight had merely cackled, patting first Eraser and then Izuku on the cheek before leaving the teachers’ lounge with a frightfully thoughtful look on her face.

“You have a lot of games,” Shouto says abruptly, crouched next to the bookshelf, having worked his way down its contents. He holds one of Izuku’s games, turning the case over between his hands as he inspects it diligently.

“Yeah,” Izuku says. Shouto’s observation was like a shock of ice water, and now Izuku’s words fall from suddenly numb lips.

“We should play,” Shouto decides.

“No,” Izuku says, drawing the denial out, long and wavering. “Why would we do that?”

“My old man hates video games. Says they’re a waste of time. I like them on principal, but I’ve never actually gotten to play one.”

Izuku rises onto his knees, leaning forward to snatch the game from Shouto’s hands. He tucks it behind his back, plastic creaking under his tight grip, fingertips bleached white from the pressure. Shouto’s mouth bends into the smallest frown, though Izuku can’t tell if he’s startled, confused, annoyed, or angry. Maybe he’s all of those things, he’d have every right to be.

“We – We can’t play,” Izuku forces out after several half-starts. “I only have two controllers, so.”

“Yeah,” Shinsou pipes in, so casual that Izuku can tell he is forcing it. “Three of us, two controllers. Wouldn’t be fair.”

Izuku’s eyes sting. He inhales deeply, exhales slowly, as inconspicuously as he can. His hands, so tense the knuckles ache, relax slightly.

“Exactly,” he breathes softly. “Thanks, Shinsou.”

“Don’t thank me. Basic math.”

Shuffling forward on his knees, Izuku slots the game back into its place on the shelf. The collection feels like an accusation, like something private and embarrassing and painful. He doesn’t even know why he has them, it’s not like he plays them. Mic and Eraser had been insistent though, that Izuku *have* things, things just for himself, just because, and games were the only things he could think of. And they were nice to have, even if he never played them. They just weren’t something other people were meant to see, let alone *touch*.

“We could take turns?”

“Oh my *god*, Todoroki,” Shinsou hisses, abandoning his casual affectation. “*Read the room.*”

Shouto leans back slightly at Shinsou’s tone. He says, “Oh. Sorry.”

It is very obvious that he doesn’t know what he is apologizing for. Shinsou has no idea what’s going on, either, that’s equally obvious – he’s just better at identifying peoples’ sore spots. The silence is oppressive, Shouto and Shinsou watching Izuku cautiously, like he is something unpredictable and dangerous. It must seem that way to them, with him suddenly going frantic over such a small thing.

Izuku takes another deep breath, straightens the line of games. His lungs twinge just slightly, but the breath comes easy, in and out without catching. His hands shake just a little, but his fingers are responsive, alive and tactile.

Izuku clears his throat. “S-sorry. It’s just – they’re not r-really mine.”

That’s the best way to put it. The games aren’t his to play, certainly not his to play with Shouto and Shinsou, these friend-adjacent someday-heroes, in this bedroom that Izuku has begun to think of as his own.

“I got them for my brother,” Izuku says. The words come easier than Izuku ever thought they would.

“Wait a minute,” Shinsou says, in that gruff way he does when his mouth gets ahead of his brain. “You have a *brother?*” His shock is probably warranted, considering the loose sketch he has of the situation with Izuku’s father, but as soon as the question is out of his mouth Shinsou’s brain seems to catch up. He grimaces.

“Something like that,” Izuku replies.

There is no exact word for a boy who your father groomed from a young age, who grew by your side for five years, but who was always treated distinctly *different*. Of course, All for One called them brothers from the very beginning, but Izuku has long since realized that that was just another manipulation. Izuku and Tomura had never used the word themselves, not out loud, not to each other. Maybe Tomura had never even thought of them that way. But brother really is the only way to put it, even if neither of them ever actually acknowledged that when they were still together. Despite how messy it all is, despite the

resentment and the anger and the death, *brother* slots into Izuku's chest like a puzzle piece. There is a brother-shaped hole in him that aches.

"He's still alive, right?" Shinsou asks. Then, a split second later, "Wait, shit, sorry, don't answer that." It wrings a wet laugh out of Izuku.

"Y-yes, Shinsou, he's st-still alive."

"Oh, well. That's good, right?"

"Depends on who you ask."

"You're talking about Shigaraki Tomura," Shouto says, a statement rather than a question. Shouto, Izuku has realized, is rather good at extrapolating from disjointed bits of information, even if he sometimes puts the pieces together all wrong.

Izuku supposes this one wasn't all that hard to figure out.

So Midoriya has a villain brother. Considering the whole villain father thing, Hitoshi shouldn't be so surprised. Any brother of Midoriya's was bound to be a villain, given the circumstances. Or at least as much of a villain as Midoriya was – which is to say kinda-sorta a villain, if you tilt your head to the left and squint.

Shigaraki Tomura, though. He had started a whole *league* of villains. He had attacked the USJ. He had tried to kill All Might. According to the news, he could turn things to dust with his hands. That's way more than kinda-sorta. That's *highly dangerous, don't approach* levels of villainy. Suddenly, the situation seems much more real, the weight of it crashing into Hitoshi like a wrecking ball.

Looking at Midoriya – the slump of his shoulders, the bend of his neck, the shadows under his eyes, the scars around his wrist – it occurs to Hitoshi that it has *always* been real. Long before Hitoshi knew Midoriya existed, when Hitoshi's biggest problem was how much he fucking hated robots, Midoriya was living through hell. Even now, when Midoriya sometimes seems so bright and open and kind that Hitoshi forgets he was ever anything other than a hero brat, Midoriya is *still* living with the consequences.

Fuck Shigaraki Tomura, and fuck whoever their father was, and fuck every link in the chain of events that led to Midoriya's hands shaking over the titles of games he doesn't even play. Family is a fucked up thing, Hitoshi knows. It can fuck people up.

The silence is smothering, and Midoriya seems to shrink more and more with every moment. He closes a hand around his right wrist, fingers slotting into the grooves of the scar there in a smooth, habitual movement that speaks of countless repetitions. Unconsciously, Hitoshi brings a hand up to his face, running his fingers over the divot on the bridge of his nose, nearly invisible but just deep enough that his nails catch in the groove every time he passes over it.

"My mom kept me muzzled."

Hitoshi doesn't realize he has spoken aloud until he notices Midoriya. His kicked-puppy raw-nerve vulnerability shifts instantaneously to a rictus of horror that makes Hitoshi's stomach turn over and try to crawl up his throat.

"I mean," he says. Battery acid coats his tongue and teeth. He's not sure what he means. He babbles, "You know how it is. Turn four, get your quirk, it's great, except four-year-olds aren't really known for their, uh, control. Quirk control, impulse control, take your pick.

"My parents divorced when I was, I don't know, two or something, right, and my mom took custody and my dad moved to the city for work, and I only saw him maybe a handful of times a year. When my birthday came around my dad was busy, he was always busy, but my mom – turned out my mom wasn't really jazzed about the whole thing. Like, the – uh, the brainwashing thing, that is. Figured I couldn't – hmmm – steal her autonomy or anything? If I just. Couldn't talk.

"Anyway, Dad finally visited, um, a couple of months after. Got right pissed, took my mom to court, yada yada. The point is – family is fucked up. Family fucks you up. But really–" Hitoshi clears his throat, voice scratchy and crackling. "Fuck them."

Excellent recovery, Hitoshi thinks to himself, lightheaded. Follow one incriminating statement up by word-vomiting even more. You know what would fix this mortifying situation? More mortification. Just overshare and make *everyone* uncomfortable, then the discomfort cancels out and you can all have a good laugh and move on. That's definitely how it works. Good going, Hitoshi. At least Midoriya doesn't

look like he's waiting for a death sentence, anymore.

"Fuck them," Todoroki repeats slowly, like he is testing the words. He says it again, more confidently, nodding once. Then, "My father wants to use me as a tool to surpass All Might. He married my mother specifically in hopes of bearing a child with a quirk stronger than his own."

"A quirk marriage," Midoriya spits, surprisingly vitriolic.

"Quirk marriages are illegal," Hitoshi says dumbly, still processing Todoroki's words, the grim look on the boy's usually impassive face. Todoroki scoffs. The sound seems inappropriately coarse coming from someone so quiet, so reserved, so distant.

"Nothing is illegal when you have money and power. He forced my mother to marry him, made her carry child after child, neglected them when they didn't meet his standards, and drove my eldest brother to destruction with his 'training.'"

"Did he give you that scar?" Midoriya asks in a fierce whisper, leaning close to Todoroki with an expression that Hitoshi can only describe as righteous and vengeful. It makes the hair on the back of Hitoshi's neck stand up, like a static charge in the air.

Todoroki, who has been nauseatingly matter-of-fact in his declaration, falters briefly, covering his eye with his palm. "No. My mother poured boiling water over my face. She couldn't stand to look at my left side. He's kept her in the hospital ever since." If not for that small pause, that fraction of hesitation, Hitoshi would almost think Todoroki was unbothered.

Todoroki Shouto, with his amazing quirk, with all his money and his connections. Todoroki Shouto, attractive and mysterious, envied by everyone. Man, Hitoshi has thought who knows how many times, imagine being Todoroki Shouto, imagine being that lucky.

Here Hitoshi has been, thinking he has been unlucky, that he was born with an *unlucky quirk* that has made his life so much harder than it would have been otherwise. Maybe everyone is unlucky, actually. Maybe making life harder is just what quirks *do*.

"Fuck him," Hitoshi decides. "He fucked you up, and he fucked your mom up. *Fuck him*."

"Fuck him!" Todoroki echoes, louder than Hitoshi ever would have

expected. He meets Hitoshi's eyes fiercely, and Hitoshi is surprised to feel a spark of something that feels almost like camaraderie.

"Fuck my mom, and fuck your dad, and *fuck* Shigaraki Tomura."

"No." Midoriya's sharp interjection takes much of the wind out of Hitoshi's scornful self-empowerment.

"He fucked you up, Midoriya. Fuck that guy," Hitoshi says. Todoroki nods, an unexpected ally.

"*No,*" Midoriya insists. "You don't know what you're talking about. It's not the same. Tomura hasn't *fucked me up*, he's *been fucked up*. He's like – he's like Todoroki's mom. She gave you that scar, but we're not saying fuck her, because *Endeavor* fucked her up. I'm not *done* with Tomura; I can't let it be over."

Midoriya tilts his chin up, and Hitoshi doesn't even get a moment to process how many times Midoriya just said *fuck*. Midoriya's got that look in his eyes. The one that makes Hitoshi feel so small and insignificant, but in the best way. That intense, humbling look that makes Hitoshi sure Midoriya could do anything he set his mind to, god have mercy on anyone who tries to stand in his way.

"Fuck your mom," Midoriya proclaims, "and fuck Endeavor. And honestly? *Fuck* All For One!"

"Is that your father?" Todoroki asks, while Hitoshi is busy feeling a bit pinned under the weight of Midoriya's eyes and words.

"Yes! I loved him, and he – he loved me, he did, but. But so what?! That doesn't make it better! It doesn't cancel out! He fucked me up! He fucked *Tomura* up! He's fucked up the entire world, so *fuck him!"*

Hitoshi reaches out and grasps Midoriya's arm, squeezing hard, just below the elbow. "Fuck All for One."

"Fuck All for One," Todoroki says.

Like a chorus, they repeat themselves, as if they are trying to speak something into being, or maybe just purge it from inside them. Fuck Hitoshi's mother, fuck Endeavor, and fuck All for One.

They don't owe anything to anyone. If they fuck you up, then fuck them.

Good can be good enough, can't it?

Nothing is ever perfect, but we take pieces of perfection where we can find them, patch them together into something beautiful. There will still be sharp edges. Patchwork-perfection is beautiful, but it's also a bit broken. It's inevitable that you'll break a little, too. That you'll cut yourself on some of those seams.

It won't hurt forever, will it?

Broken things can be fixed. Everything goes wrong, but we recover. It's not as if we live solely in mistakes.

Then again, the reverse must also be true. Fixed things break. Just as we think we've recovered, everything goes wrong. Something that seems too good to be true probably is.

Nothing lasts forever.

But that includes the pain.

Chapter End Notes

CW for Shouto's backstory and mentions of muzzling a child

Hitoshi: Why do you have bunny ears?
Izuku: Oh no, they're stupid :(
Shouto: Don't worry, they're cute
Izuku: Thank you :)
Hitoshi: How *dare you* make him feel better after I put my foot in my mouth?
Aizawa: Shoot me now, please

Hitoshi: Bastard is my spirit animal
Shouto: Izuku, are you sure this guy is safe to be around?

Hitoshi: c,,,cock confetti
Izuku: SHINSOU NO

The Boys: FUCK THEM!!!
Mic: What's going on in there? Do you think everything's alright?
Aizawa: They're bonding, leave them alone.

Next chapter: Bloodcurdle – Part III

Bloodcurdle - Part III

Chapter Notes

> One part of me is like – yikes, can't believe I haven't updated in 3 months. Another part says – holy shit how has it only been 3 months. Anyway, this chapter is on the longer side, to tide you over for another ??? months. I'm actually pretty happy with it, despite how out of practice I've gotten. Thank you all, as always, for your patience and support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shinsou and Todoroki get on like a house on fire. Which is to say, everything is terrible and Shouta feels the immediate need to evacuate. He thought Shinsou's animosity was going to be tiring, but he takes it back; he'd take the snark and sarcasm over whatever weird bond they've established, especially since Shinsou somehow still manages to be nearly as standoffish as before. Hizashi is no help. He seems to think it's hilarious, though Shouta suspects that he's mostly laughing at Shouta's misery. Izuku walks between the other two boys as Shouta leads them to the gym, but he's short enough that Shinsou can just snipe at Todoroki over his head. Shouta needs a nap.

"Right on time!" a chirpy voice greets the moment the group enters the gym.

Shouta freezes in mixed dread and relief. Nedzu stands expectantly at the center of the large room, hands folded politely behind his back as he smiles at them. The rat's presence never bodes well for Shouta. History would indicate Nedzu's scheming; he always is, after all. But maybe just this once, Shouta can resign himself to that fact, decide it's not his problem, and shove his trio of students on the principal so he can get some damned rest.

Shouta weighs his options, then sighs. Who's he kidding? As tired as he is, it's not like he would actually be able to get any sleep, knowing his students are unsupervised and at Nedzu's manipulative mercy. On the off chance he managed a nap, he would wake up to potentially world ending chaos.

"What are you doing here?" Shouta asks flatly.

"I'm here to help!" Nedzu says. Shouta doubts that. "Izuku is still my

personal student, after all. It only seems right that I assist with his internship where I can."

"Don't you have work to do?"

"I've cleared my schedule!"

Of course he had. With another sigh, Shouta crosses his arms. Izuku is very obviously excited. Spending so much time with Nedzu in an academic setting has made him increasingly curious about how Nedzu applies his intellect in practical heroics. Even Todoroki and Shinsou seem interested, though the latter at least has the good sense to look apprehensive, as well. Shouta resigns himself to the fact that Nedzu is certainly scheming, and to the fact that it is also definitely Shouta's problem.

"What did you have in mind?" he asks.

"Just a simple exercise," Nedzu responds. He is likely trying to be reassuring, but he misses by a mile. "A game! Ground Beta has already been prepared."

"Ground Beta?" Izuku asks.

"Ah, of course – this will be a first for you and Shinsou, won't it?" The rat grins. "Ground Beta is one of our immersive training grounds. It fully simulates your typical urban area, with buildings and streets and all the appropriate infrastructure. It's generally used to teach students to be cautious of their environment and to avoid collateral damage, but in my experience it's also great for scavenger hunts."

The thin thread of restraint Izuku had been clinging to snaps. He bounces up on his toes. Shouta reaches back and grabs him by the skull to hold him down, not breaking eye contact with Nedzu. Over the years, Shouta has noticed a direct correlation between how innocent Nedzu seems and how much Shouta will end up suffering. Now, the rat continues smiling placidly under Shouta's scrutiny, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"Scavenger hunt," Shouta repeats.

"I'll explain when we get there," Nedzu promises.

Withholding the details until they were already committed, then. Devious bastard.

Shouta allows it – though knowing the rat, he never actually had a choice in the matter. Nedzu leads the way, radiating that subtle smugness that makes Shouta want to strangle him. Izuku bombards his mentor with dozens of questions about Ground Beta's structure and upkeep and Nedzu answers at a pace that leaves Todoroki blinking in confusion and Shinsou staring into space with a glazed look in his eyes.

Shouta stops the group outside the gates to the training area, grabbing Izuku by the elbow to keep him from barging ahead in his eagerness. Knowing Nedzu, there's a distinct possibility they'll be set upon by robots the moment they enter the walls, and the last thing they need is Izuku getting blindsided and reflexively dealing massive damage to school property. There is still a crater in the ceiling of Gym Gamma – apparently it is low priority on Cementoss' list of necessary repairs.

"What are you planning?" Shouta asks.

Nedzu claps once, ignoring the note of accusation in Shouta's question. "As I said, a scavenger hunt of sorts! There are 15 flags hidden throughout this quadrant of Ground Beta, five for each of you." He produces three pennant flags, approximately the size of Shouta's hand, one green, one purple, and one red, passing them to Izuku, Shinsou, and Todoroki respectively. "Your goal is to be the first to return to this gate with all of your flags, including the one I've just handed you!"

"What do we do if we find a flag that's not ours?" Shinsou asks, shoving his first flag into a side pocket on his belt.

"Whatever you want!" Nedzu replies.

Shinsou smiles, sharp. "That's what I was hoping you'd say."

"What if we run into each other?" Todoroki asks next.

"The answer is the same! If you best one of your peers, they will have to cede one of their flags to the victor and suffer a ten minute time penalty."

Izuku frowns. "What do you mean by 'b-best?'" he asks, fidgeting uncomfortably. "What would qualify?"

"Immobilization and incapacitation!" Nedzu answers gleefully. "We'll be watching, of course, and a buzzer will sound at the start and end of the time penalty." Almost as an afterthought, Nedzu adds, "Obviously,

avoid causing any major injury. This game is likely to last through the morning, possibly for most of the day, and we don't want any of you becoming truly indisposed. That would be a rather disappointing way to end things."

Bluntly, Shouta says, "Your sociopathic tendencies are showing."

"Any more questions?" Nedzu asks.

The boys are silent. Izuku seems slightly exasperated, though he's had plenty of exposure to Nedzu's brand of testing. Todoroki looks the same as ever, but Shouta wouldn't have expected anything else. Shinsou, apparently the only one of the three with any sense of self-preservation, looks markedly more uncertain about the situation.

The rat grins unrepentantly and claps again. "Excellent! You'll need to scour the city while simultaneously avoiding your rivals – or incapacitating and sabotaging them, should you so choose!"

His tone makes it entirely obvious which tactic he would rather see. Considering that Nedzu's own strategies often rely on enacting a plan entirely within enemy blind spots, it's absurdly hypocritical of him to encourage the boys to confront each other, but Shouta already knows that the real goal is to see how they bend under the pressure of the circumstances. Nedzu has always had a special fondness of seeing what tactics people would enact when pitted against their allies. By way of Nedzu's schemes, it could be worse. At least Shouta can be relatively certain that there's no risk of any of the trio committing manslaughter in the arena. He's 99% confident – it's the 1% that makes his job so fucked up.

"Well?" Shouta asks, turning away from the three boys, who are all awaiting further instruction. "What are you waiting for?"

Todoroki moves first, already accustomed to the rapid pace of heroics training. Izuku moves only a moment later, and he moves faster, disappearing into the urban maze of Ground Beta in an instant. Shinsou stays rooted in place for a full two seconds before he curses and sprints away.

Without complaint, Shouta allows Nedzu to scale up his side and take roost on his shoulder, though he scowls all the while. He pulls his authorization badge from inside his jumpsuit, scanning it against a hidden censor near the gates. Concrete grinds against concrete as a staircase entrance opens in the ground, leading deep beneath the training grounds. Nedzu kicks his feet against Shouta's chest in a

childish display of excitement as they descend into the central monitoring room. As Nedzu hops from Shouta's shoulder to the control center, Shouta slumps into a seat, glancing rapidly between the camera feeds as Nedzu lights them up. Rapidly, Nedzu manipulates the setup, pressing buttons and inputting commands until he has a view of each of the boys from the city's camera grid and drones deployed to track them more closely.

Two of the camera feeds are showing different angles of the same street, Todoroki and Shinsou already locked in a confrontation. Shinsou is quite literally locked in, encased in ice up to the knee and looking none too happy about it, a vicious scowl tugging at his mouth and forehead. Nedzu looks far too satisfied as he triggers the buzzer that signals Shinsou's defeat, flicking another switch as he does so. Audio spills into the control room.

"That's cheap," Shinsou accuses, glaring at the sky as the buzzer fades. With great reluctance, he digs out his single flag and surrenders it to Todoroki, who looks at the scrap of fabric like he has no idea what it is.

"You should have been paying more attention," he informs Shinsou after a long moment of baffled staring.

"I was," Shinsou protests. "I was looking for my stupid flags."

"The flags aren't going to attack you."

Shinsou gapes. "No way," he deadpans, bitingly sarcastic. "I had no idea."

Todoroki, unaffected or unaware, merely nods once before melting the ice trapping Shinsou in place and leaving him behind. Shinsou huffs, dropping to the ground and sitting cross-legged to wait out his ten minutes, while Todoroki scales a nearby building for an arial view of the area. Whether he is looking for his flags or Izuku, he sees nothing, a crease of consternation forming between his eyebrows. He looks at Shinsou's flag, still crumpled in his fist, and with a shrug, drops it on the roof before leaping over the edge to start searching the city in earnest.

Nedzu clicks his tongue, underwhelmed. "What a missed opportunity."

Shouta pinches the bridge of his nose, though he's not entirely surprised. Todoroki possess a kind of single-minded focus that can make him a very intimidating opponent, but it also cripples his

creativity too often. If the purpose of the exercise were to hide the flags, Shouta has no doubt that Todoroki would do a much better job, but it seems like he's decided not to waste his energy on that aspect of things when he could instead focus on *finding* them.

Over the course of the morning, Shouta watches as all three boys develop their own distinct tactics. The first few pennants are easily collected, given that their starting placements are relatively obvious and easily spotted. Locating them is still an inherently time-consuming task, due to the size of the search area, but this exercise is designed to start simply and then become more and more complicated as the competitors create obstacles for each other.

Knowingly or not, Shinsou and Todoroki are playing a perfect tug-of-war.

Todoroki hunts for his opponents as diligently as his flags but, failing to find Izuku, it is Shinsou who finds himself on the wrong side of Nedzu's buzzer time and time again. By the three hour mark, all six of Shinsou's flags have, at some point, been in his possession. They never stay there, ceded repeatedly to Todoroki, accompanied by increasingly lengthy strings of curses. Found, then lost, only to be found again when Todoroki merely drops them on some rooftop or another.

While Todoroki negates any progress Shinsou makes, Shinsou very effectively prevents Todoroki from making any progress at all. The first red flag Shinsou finds is crumpled into a tight ball and shoved deep into a dumpster, beneath a wealth of cardboard boxes. Another is painstakingly wedged into the weathered gap between a window frame and wall. Shouta is grudgingly impressed. The way things are going, he'd say that between the two, Shinsou actually had the advantage. To his credit, he is getting better at escaping Todoroki's attention as the exercise progresses. Given that improvement and failing a change of strategy on Todoroki's part, it seems inevitable that Shinsou will eventually manage to get his hands on all six of his flags simultaneously, while Shouta doubts Todoroki will ever be able to find the ones Shinsou has hidden. Shouta doubts that anyone could find those flags in a reasonable amount of time without some kind of quirk to assist the search.

Shouta suspects that Izuku must have exactly some kind of quirk. While Shinsou and Todoroki push and pull in a complicated dance of sabotage, Izuku has been minding his own business so entirely that Nedzu has actually begun hissing in frustrated disappointment whenever the kid manages to pass by one of his competitors

completely unnoticed. He doesn't touch his opponents flags when he comes across them. He doesn't touch his opponents either, and his opponents never even see him, to Todoroki's obviously mounting impatience.

Izuku's search is thorough and methodical. He finds his first three of his flags quickly, but the next two take him significantly longer, having already fallen into Shinsou's hands. One had been dropped down a manhole with a gleefully sadistic laugh; the other was placed in the cash register of a staged convenience store, which was then locked with the key placed in the back office, which was then locked with the key slipped into the middle of a stack of newspapers a block away. It takes Izuku hours to find those two flags, but in Shouta's opinion, it shouldn't even be possible. There must be *some kind* of quirk involved, not that Shouta can even begin to guess what.

"Where's his last flag?" Shouta asks Nedzu when Izuku stops on a rooftop to stare out at the city after another fruitless hour of searching.

Nedzu raises a paw to his mouth, doing very little to hide the savage grin that spreads across his face. "Shinsou has it."

"Oh," Shouta says. Then, "Oooh."

It's a clever move. Once again, Shouta finds himself impressed. Shinsou has been rather predictable in their training thus far, but in this different environment, different context, he has managed to repeatedly surprise Shouta with his adaptability and improvisation. Where would Izuku least expect and least *desire* to find one of his flags? On a person, a friend, someone he would be forced to confront if he wanted to win. It runs perfectly counter to Izuku's whole strategy. Shouta makes a mental note to try to keep Nedzu's influence on Shinsou as minimal as possible. Izuku, at least, has the good nature to cancel out the rat's bad influence – Shouta can't trust the same to be true for Shinsou, who would probably be all too eager to recklessly overthrow the government.

For a long while, the game continues as it has been, this new information not yet coming to bear. Izuku moves around the arena like a shadow, scouring every inch of it in search of his final flag, neatly dancing around detection as he does. Todoroki intercepts Shinsou, though with continuously decreasing frequency. Shinsou finally manages to keep ahold of four of his flags, and in another surprisingly development, manages to capitalize on Todoroki's

mounting agitation to turn the tables and catch him with his quirk. While Todoroki leans against a wall to wait, very nearly pouting, Shinsou runs off to banish a third of his flags into oblivion.

On a rooftop several blocks away, Izuku abruptly straightens. He stares into space for a long moment, mouth pursing. Shouta can practically see the gears turning in his head. Nedzu giggles to himself. With a wordless exclamation of realization, Izuku knocks the heel of his palm into his temple and turns exactly in Shinsou's direction, like a compass needle pointing north.

Perhaps, Shouta reflects as Izuku hones in on Shinsou like a heat seeking missile, it is for the better that Izuku has refused to sabotage his classmates. If he were uninhibited, Izuku would likely be nearly as devious as Shinsou in hiding flags and it would be impossible for his opponents to hide from his quirk awareness. With the number of abilities at his disposal, Izuku's direct interference would make his peers' participation functionally futile.

Giddy with anticipation, Nedzu enlarges the feed Shinsou is on, an unnoticed drone tracking him closely as he moves. He has made his way into one of the buildings, wandering through it until he finds a staged office on the sixth floor, crowded with partitioned desks, chairs, and filing cabinets. Hardly hesitating, he climbs on top of one of the cabinets, shifting one of the ceiling panels to the side and tucking Todoroki's flag into the hollow space between the levels of the building. Shinsou replaces the panel with a satisfied smirk.

"You're good at this," Izuku compliments, perched on top of a desk three down from where Shinsou is standing. Shinsou yelps, jolting high enough that his head bumps into the ceiling. The panel he just corrected rains plaster into his hair as it is knocked askew.

"What the fuck?" Shinsou gasps, wobbling for a moment before sitting heavily on top of the filing cabinets. "Someone needs to put a bell on you."

"Todoroki's never going to find that," Izuku says, nodding toward the ceiling.

"That's the point."

"I'm better at finding things than Todoroki," Izuku says, as much a threat as a warning.

"Nooo," Shinsou denies pointlessly.

“Give me the flag.”

“What flag?”

“Shinsou.”

“Midoriya.”

“I don’t want to f-fight you.”

“Then don’t?” Shinsou suggests. Nedzu laughs; Shouta groans.

“I will if I h-have to.”

Shinsou had been looking a bit hapless, thrown off balance by Izuku’s sudden appearance and determined demeanor, but now he gains his bearings and smiles lazily. “Oh? What makes you think I’ll let you?” Izuku shifts his weight back and forth on his heels. “Nothing to say?”

Izuku levelly meets Shinsou’s challenging stare. He is largely unreadable. Shinsou made a mistake in engaging instead of seizing his advantage from the very beginning. Gloating before a fight is won is never a good idea but Shouta is entirely unsurprised that Shinsou would make that mistake. Shouta waits for Izuku to dash forward, knowing that he would be able to subdue Shinsou and claim his final flag before Shinsou even realized what happened.

Instead, Izuku says, “Let’s t-take this outside.”

Nedzu giggles. Shouta feels like he forgot the final step of a staircase – like the ground is not where he thought it should be and he’s not sure whether or not he’s falling as he tries to figure out what’s happening.

Shinsou’s smile is painfully smug and almost predatory as he counters, “How about this? You give me your flags and get out of here. Go give Todoroki some trouble, instead. Sounds much better to me.”

Izuku leaps to his feet. Then he sighs and shakes his arms out, studiously refusing to look at Shinsou. His firmness is growing increasingly forced, a flightiness dancing under his skin like he might make a break for it at any moment. Shouta leans forward, intently resting his elbows against the table as he gets as close to the monitor as he comfortably can. Nedzu stands on the desk next to him, practically bouncing in place with an uncharacteristic lack of composure.

“He didn’t,” Shouta breathes.

“He did!” Nedzu crows.

On the screen, Izuku scratches the back of his neck, darting nervous little glances in Shinsou’s general direction. Sheepish and apologetic, he shrugs, the jerk of his shoulders more like a spasm than a casual gesture.

“Oh shit,” Shinsou says, flat with shock. He’s gone pale.

“Let’s t-take this out-outside,” Izuku repeats. He makes a sweeping gesture towards the front of the building, resolutely ignoring the visible tremor of his arm. “I won’t l-let you w-win this t-t-time.”

Shinsou blinks, opens his mouth then shuts it without saying anything, shakes his head. Izuku braces himself like he is trying to defuse a bomb, tense and fearful and knowing that there is nothing he can do if things blow up in his face.

After a long, thick moment, Shinsou laughs. The sound is strained, but not hysterical or entirely insincere. He climbs down off the filing cabinets, facing Izuku with his own façade of confidence, just as transparent in his own way.

“Man,” he drawls, over-casual. “I really should have just taken that as the blessing it was, huh? Screwed myself over with my principles or whatever.”

“Mhmm,” Izuku hums, sagging with cautious relief. “D-don’t look a g-gift horse in the mouth.”

“I’ve never even seen a fucking horse.”

“Me neither.”

“This isn’t what I was expecting,” Shouta comments dryly as the boys stare at each other for an awkwardly long second. He’s unsure how to feel about this development. Izuku has stepped in a minefield and Shinsou has consented to walk it with him. Shouta has no idea what they’re thinking.

“I have to say the same,” Nedzu admits, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Not what I expected at all.”

“So,” Shinsou says after a silent walk back to the street. “Are you

going to give me my quirk back? Or are we doing this 0 to 104." The camera here is far enough away and the angle is bad enough that Shouta can't say exactly what Shinsou's face does, but he has seen the kid's brain catch up with his mouth enough times to imagine it. "Shit, uh–"

"I'll g-give it back," Izuku interrupts before Shinsou's panicked backtracking can begin in earnest. "It'll be, uh – 1 to 103." Shouta thinks it's meant to be a joke, as hard as that is for him to believe, but Izuku is wound tight as he says it. He spits the words out quickly, like he is desperate to be done with them. Shouta can't believe he managed to say them at all. Shinsou laughs wryly and, in increments, Izuku relaxes. Shouta allows himself to do the same, though confusion still sits like a stone in his stomach.

"Much better odds," Shinsou scoffs.

"We c-could go 0-0," Izuku offers. "No q-quirks. Level the playing field."

"Level, sure. You're going to kick my ass."

"I d-did say I wasn't going to let you win."

"I thought you meant it more along the lines of not throwing the fight. Not that you just – wouldn't *let* me win. Ever. At all. Because that's how little a chance I have of beating you."

"We don't *have* to f-fight," Izuku points out, a hesitantly amused tilt to his mouth, like he is not sure if he is allowed to smile. "You could just give me my flag."

Shinsou is shaking his head long before Izuku finishes speaking. "Not happening. You're going to fucking destroy me and you're going to have to live with that guilt. I hope it haunts you forever."

Izuku laughs, sharp and startled. "You're so weird! Come get your quirk back, weirdo."

"I'm going to cheat," Shinsou solemnly informs Izuku as they clasp hands. Izuku doesn't falter. Shouta feels like he has stumbled into a parallel universe.

"No, you're not. You're going to – you're going to get your ass kicked."

“Right,” Shinsou sighs. “That’s the plan.”

The fight, when they finally get to it, is brutally short. The verbal sparring lasted at least twice as long as the physical. Shinsou does, in fact, get his ass kicked, though his growth over the last two weeks is abundantly clear in the way he moves. He holds up relatively well, considering that Izuku has five years of incredibly rigorous experience under his belt, while Shinsou’s training has only just begun. Still, when all is said and done, Shinsou ends up flat on the asphalt. Izuku searches the pockets of his belt for the final green flag while Shinsou groans unhelpfully.

“Feel guilty yet?” Shinsou wheezes.

“I don’t know how I’ll be able to sleep at night,” Izuku assures him.

“Good.”

Whatever Izuku says next is lost as Nedzu flips off the audio switch with a sigh. He frowns at the screen, watching dispassionately as Izuku salutes Shinsou and then runs off towards the gates. Shouta should probably go up to meet him, but –

“Are you pouting?” he can’t help but ask in disbelief. “Why are you pouting.”

“I’m not *pouting*,” Nedzu refutes, tugging down his waistcoat. “I was merely hoping that Izuku would put on a bigger display than that. With the way he was using his quirk, I thought that he’d finally cut loose a bit. We’ve yet to see what he’s truly capable of.”

Shouta opens his mouth to reply but then just shakes his head. Izuku had *cut loose* in a way Shouta had never thought he would get to see, least of all so *soon.* There was still discomfort there, Izuku was obviously still afraid and uncertain, but those feelings had gotten small enough that he could, apparently, push past them under the right circumstances. He had taken Shinsou’s quirk – he hadn’t needed to, not really, and it had only given him the slightest of advantages, but he had done it anyway and he and Shinsou had *joked* about it together. Just the other day, Shouta had listed addressing Shinsou and Izuku’s avoidance and discomfort with Izuku’s quirk as a primary goal of their internship. He had thought he would have to painstakingly coax them into jumping the hurdle and instead they had just gone and knocked it over all on their own.

Come get your quirk back, weirdo, echoes in Shouta’s ears because Izuku

had been *laughing* as he said it. He hadn't even stuttered. And Shouta is grateful, he is, because this is progress. But he would be lying if he said it didn't also make him nervous. He has no idea where this came from, what changed, or if it's sustainable. Izuku cut loose so abruptly and completely that Shouta is afraid he is going to get whiplash.

"Let's head back up," Shouta says, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. "Izuku is probably already waiting at the gates. It won't be long before Todoroki and Shinsou join him and who knows what the three of them could get up to unsupervised."

"Oh?" Nedzu asks, perking up as he hops onto Shouta's shoulder.

"No," Shouta says sharply. "Don't get any ideas."

Due to certain unbreakable laws of the universe, Hitoshi can't sleep. It must be written somewhere in the very fabric of existence that Shinsou Hitoshi is not permitted to get more than one good night's sleep a week lest the world end, abruptly and tragically. Unfortunately, through some insane design flaw, the continued existence of the entire universe, perhaps even the multi-verse, hinges on Hitoshi being poorly rested.

Last night had been so nice. After Aizawa put them through the wringer, Hitoshi had been so physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, everything-ly exhausted that he had slept so deeply he had practically fallen into an eight hour coma. Now that he thinks of it, maybe he didn't fall asleep so much as pass out.

When Hitoshi was younger, he always wanted to have sleepovers. He had yearned for them, like spending the night in someone else's home was the pinnacle of happiness and social acceptance. He revises that opinion, now. Sleepovers fucking suck. Doesn't being unconscious kind of defeat the point of spending a huge chunk of time with someone? It's not like he can enjoy anyone's company – or whatever it is people do when they spend time together – when he's sleeping. It's also not like he can *fucking sleep,* which admittedly puts a bit of a damper on the whole "sleepover" concept.

Hitoshi mentally shakes his head. Mentally, not physically. Physically he is laying very, very still, because if he moves, he'll make noise, and

then he might wake Midoriya. Hitoshi would actually rather die than wake Midoriya. So he can't move, which means he can't get comfortable or get his phone so he could at least have something to look at other than the ceiling. He's doomed to laying here like a board until it is socially acceptable for him to get up and steal Aizawa's coffee.

"Are you still breathing?"

The question takes Hitoshi so off guard that the air punches out of his lungs.

"Yes," he wheezes, breathlessly because he realizes now that he had, in fact, been holding his breath. He doesn't know why. Leading experts theorize that it's because he's a fucking disaster.

Hitoshi's blankets had tangled around his legs when he startled, and he sets about righting them. He can hardly see Midoriya in the dark, just the vague shadow of his head propped up and the ghost of paleness where his eyes are open.

"You're awake," Hitoshi observes.

"I am," Midoriya confirms.

"Why are you awake?"

"It's just," Midoriya sighs. His bedding rustles as he sits up, and then there is a soft chirp as he drags a pale blob, Lucy, into his lap. Hitoshi is unspeakably jealous. "I'm so eaten up with g-guilt after totally k-kicking your–"

"Oh my god," Hitoshi interrupts, amused and deeply irritated by it. "Shut up. I think I liked you better when you could barely string a sentence together. Why are you such a smartass?"

Midoriya shuts up. As the silence drags on, Hitoshi's words start to sit uncomfortably on his tongue. Don't they always? They weren't even true. He vastly prefers the Midoriya who babbles and snarks to the one that stutters and cries. Hitoshi is just a dick.

"Fuck," he groans. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Midoriya says. He sounds like he means it. He always sounds like he means it, and Hitoshi is a bit baffled by that.

“It’s really not,” Hitoshi says. “Look, you know I have, um, Saying Shit I Shouldn’t Syndrom.”

“Right. SSSS,” Midoriya smashes the acronym together into one long hiss. He giggles to himself before clearing his throat and feigning seriousness. “How could I forget? Go on.”

“It’s chronic,” Hitoshi explains, equally stoic. “There’s no cure and the – the only treatment is people *telling me* when I’m being an asshole.”

“You seem to figure it out pretty well on your own,” Midoriya points out. Hitoshi snorts and rolls his eyes in the dark.

“That’s not the point.”

“You have a point?”

“Rude.”

Midoriya laughs again. “Sorry,” he says, laughter trailing off into something sheepish and self-conscious. “I sh-shouldn’t – it’s late.” The apology is unnecessary, so Hitoshi ignores it. What’s he even apologizing for? Having a personality? Hitoshi’s personality is being a tired, misanthropic bastard, so he’s not really in a position to judge.

“The point is, I’m not usually trying to be – insensitive, or whatever. All that, uh, *stuff*, it’s not stuff that I want to be a dick about, okay. So if I say something fucked up I want to know, right, so I can control my, uh, asshole-ness. I’m working on it.”

“Shinsou,” Midoriya says, soft and firm at once. Hitoshi instinctually looks over to him, despite being able to see fuck all. “It’s *fine*, really. I – well, I kind of like it, I guess? Ugh, that sounds w-weird, it’s just. Everyone treats me like I’m made of g-glass, and I get why, but it’s, it’s nice to, to h-have–” Midoriya cuts himself off with a frustrated noise.

Hitoshi stares raptly at Midoriya’s silhouette. He closes his mouth and waits. It is probably at least 2AM, and the room is nearly pitch black, and all Hitoshi can do is listen and wait and wait to listen. There is something liminal about it. He wonders if it will feel like a dream in the morning.

Eventually Midoriya speaks again, slow and deliberate, “My friends, Eraser, Mic, Midnight, Aunt Mitsuki and Uncle Masaru – they all tell me that there’s nothing wrong with my quirk, that it doesn’t bother them. People like Katsuki tell me that it makes me a monster. You are

the *only* one who has told me the *truth*. T-that–" Midoriya's voice cracks. He pauses for a long moment and begins again, "That my quirk is terrifying. Because it *is*. A quirk like mine has no right to exist. The implications are horrifying, and who's to say that my father and I are the only ones who will have a power like this?

"But Shinsou – you aren't afraid of *me*. That's what you told me. That my quirk scares you, but I don't. And then you – you make sarcastic little comments about the horrible things I have done. Most people, they just ignore it, you know. Even me. And I don't – I don't *want* to talk about it, really, it hurts to even think about, but when I *can't* talk about it, when *nobody* can talk about, it's like a sword hanging over my head, because the words are still *there* even if no one is saying them. You're the only one who just says them, like they're not dangerous. Or maybe like – like a sword doesn't have to be used to hurt people.

"I don't know if it's fair of me to feel that way, after everything I've done, but I want – I want to live in a world where my quirk and my past *are* horrifying but *I'm* not. Where they are a sword that is safe for me to hold and safe for other people to be around. Where they happened and they are a part of me that I will always have to live with, but they will never happen again and they do not define me because I am also *more than them!* I–" His voice cracks again, bubbles over into a hitched breath. Hitoshi is completely unsurprised to realize that Midoriya has started crying, but still feels that frantic discomfort rising in his chest, the crippling uncertainty about what he is meant to do.

"Oh fuck," Hitoshi says, which is definitely not the right thing to say.

"S-sorry," Midoriya apologizes. Hitoshi is tempted to curse again, but resists.

"No, you, don't – you're fine. Don't apologize. You – it's fine."

"T-that was w-weird, wasn't it?" Midoriya asks regretfully after a brief pause. "I d-don't think I was even m-making s-sense. I d-didn't mean to make you unc-uncomfortable."

"You didn't. I'm not. It's just – a lot. I'm, uh…"

"You d-don't–"

Hitoshi leans up to wave a hand in Midoriya's face, close enough to be seen even in the dark. His glower is likely far less visible, but Hitoshi

glowers anyway.

“Give me a minute!” he demands. “We can’t all be fucking wordsmiths.”

Midoriya is silent as Hitoshi thinks, trying to wrangle the vague sentiments and unruly ideas in his head into concrete words. He gets to something halfway coherent and decides that’s good enough – he’ll wing it from there.

“Your quirk and, uh, everything that happened with it – yeah, that’s a part of you. A *part*. Just one part out of a whole fuck-ton. You’re already more than the, uh, bad bits. I trust you with the sword, alright, and anyone who doesn’t is probably an idiot because I’m pretty sure you would cry if you stepped on an ant. And honestly, I don’t really get it, but if my being an asshole helps you believe that, then you’re in luck.” There is a long silence after Hitoshi finishes and he shifts uncomfortably, suddenly certain that he has said something wrong. “Are you crying again?”

“No,” Midoriya answers and his voice is steady. “That was just surprisingly eloquent of you.”

Startled, Hitoshi laughs. “Fuck off!”

“Are you still going to insist that we’re not friends?” Midoriya asks. His teasing tone is quickly becoming familiar. It is as of yet unclear to Hitoshi whether this will turn out to be a blessing or a curse.

“We’re not,” Hitoshi insists, scrunching up his nose. “Friends are overrated. Cats are all I need.”

“I’ll change your mind,” Midoriya promises.

If Hitoshi is honest with himself, it’s entirely possible Midoriya already has. But Hitoshi is not in the mood to be honest, and the very thought makes something hot and spiny twist around in his chest. He has never had friends. He doesn’t know *how* to have friends. Friends sounds like something he would fuck up. Even Midoriya must have a limit to how many times he’ll be willing to excuse Hitoshi’s missteps.

“Go to sleep,” Hitoshi mutters, a feeble deflection even to his own ears.

“I don’t really need much sleep,” Midoriya says. The shadows under his eyes would beg to differ, but Hitoshi very polite refrains from

saying as much.

“Lucky you. Some of us are insomniacs.”

Hesitantly, Midoriya offers, “I could h-help with that, if you want.”

“What, you keep the cure for my sleep disorder in your pockets?”

“No, I – I have a q-quirk. It can… it can p-put p-people to s-sleep. I could… u-use it,” Midoriya explains haltingly, stuttering and pausing and trailing off in a way that seems distinct from his usual anxiety and distress. Hitoshi thinks he’s had enough exposure to tell the difference.

There is obviously more than Midoriya is saying. Frankly, Hitoshi should probably just assume that there’s always more to any given situation than Midoriya says. There is a temptation to hedge the issue, to test Midoriya’s stability like someone might test the thickness of ice before trusting it with their weight.

Then again, Midoriya’s not ice, and he’s not glass, either. As brittle as he has been in all the time Hitoshi has known him, he is made of something much stronger. He is strong enough to make his own choices without breaking under the pressure of them. Trusting him with a sword – or whatever other convoluted metaphor Midoriya wants to use – means trusting him not to hurt himself just as much as trusting him not to hurt someone else. And honestly, Hitoshi would pay just about any price to be able to sleep.

“Alright,” he says. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“How’s this work, then?”

“Just… lay there. I’ll hum s-something. And then it’ll b-be – you’ll f-fall asleep.”

“Think I can manage that,” Hitoshi says. He settles into his pillow, folding his hands over his stomach and closing his eyes. They ache with fatigue. He cracks one open, peering at Midoriya’s shadow, all hunched in on itself. “Right then. Sing me to sleep, sandman.”

Midoriya laughs softly, weakly. He is upset, Hitoshi can tell, and he’s glad he can still make him laugh, if only a little. Maybe they are friends, if Hitoshi wants so badly to cheer him up when he’s sad. That’s a normal thing for friends to want to do, by Hitoshi’s

understanding. Flushing, he turns away, closing both his eyes and fisting one of his hands in his shirt.

He doesn't recognize the tune Midoriya hums, but he hears very little of it before blessed, blissful sleep pulls him under at last.

Shinsou is so desperate for sleep that Lullaby sweeps him away in only a handful of seconds. Izuku forces his tears to wait until he is sure Shinsou won't wake up. Panic flashes through Izuku like a firecracker and he squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath. No – Shinsou *will* wake up, he will, just not for several hours, at least. He will wake up, well rested and grateful, because Izuku did a good thing, Izuku helped him.

Not wanting to wake anyone else in the apartment, Izuku muffles his gasps with his palm. He makes no attempts to stop the tears even though they trace sticky-itchy lines down his jaw. The crying is inevitable. There's nothing to be done for it but wait it out. Even Izuku's tears don't come in infinite supply, as much as it sometimes seems that way.

When it is over, he is exhausted and his pulse throbs in his fingertips, but he feels better for having cried. Izuku has gotten so used to crying leaving him hollow, like a shell of a person, stripped raw. His tears were waves that ravaged the shore and left nothing behind but unrecognizable debris. He feels hollow now, too; there is a new emptiness inside him, but it is a cavern where all the pain and bitterness and grief had made their home. They have been washed away and the rest of him has been left behind. This is the kind of crying that is cathartic instead of catastrophic. He has been tired for hours – hours, days, weeks, months, years, he has been *tired* – and now he finally thinks he'll be able to get some sleep.

First, he gets up, careful not to step on any of the gangly limbs that Shinsou has splayed about the floor, to visit the kitchen. His mouth is dry and his head aches like his entire skull is one massive bruise. Todoroki is asleep on the couch, drooling, with Disco stretched across his chest. Izuku stifles a snort, moving as quietly as he can as he retrieves a glass from the cabinet and fills it from the tap.

Eraser joins him just as Izuku turns the water off, slipping silently into

the kitchen and leaning back against the counter with his arms crossed. He's wearing his goggles, which look incredibly goofy with the brightly colored T-shirt advertising Mic's radio show. Izuku has a quirk for dark vision, of course, so he has the privileged ability to forego clunky eyewear. Glancing back at Todoroki, Izuku raises a finger to his lips.

Rather than speak, Eraser raises his hands and signs, "Can't sleep?" Izuku shakes his head. Eraser continues, "How are you feeling?"

Izuku huffs a silent laugh, setting his glass on the counter to sign back, "I'm feeling." His vocabulary is still quite lacking – he can usually cobble words together to get his meaning across, but he can't carry an actual conversation with any proficiency. Koda must have the patience of a saint to wade through Izuku's garbled attempts at communication. Nevertheless, as soon as it had become habit between them, Eraser had made sure that those two phrases were in Izuku's repertoire.

Whatever Eraser tries to say next is lost on Izuku. He recognizes a couple of the signs, but between the darkness and his own exhaustion, he couldn't even begin to guess at the whole meaning. He shakes his head again, shrugging helplessly. Eraser jerks his head back towards the hallway. That much, Izuku can understand. He nods, picks up his glass, and follows Eraser back to his and Mic's bedroom.

"You don't have to worry about waking Hizashi," Eraser says, voice low but not quite a whisper. He switches a lamp on low, dim golden light washing through the room. "He'd be dead to the world even if his ears weren't busted." Sure enough, Mic turns his face into his pillow but shows no sign of waking with the light.

Digging through their closet, Eraser drags out a couple of blankets and pillows, tossing them into the corner and kicking them into a makeshift nest that he flops gracelessly into. He pulls his goggles off, discarding them carelessly and then pulling his mussed-up hair into a haphazard bun. Izuku would never describe Eraser as particularly put together, but it is still interesting to see him like this – sleepy and ruffled. There is always a bit of discomfort clinging to Eraser, so persistently present that it's unnoticeable until the rare occasion it lets him go. He drags one of the blankets around his shoulders and up over his head, patting the space next to him.

"Sit," he says. "Unless you'd like to stand for this conversation."

Izuku, who is far too tired to stand for more than a minute or two,

does as instructed, making himself comfortable amid the pillows and burying his toes in an especially fluffy blanket.

“You’ve been crying,” Eraser says.

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees drowsily. “I put Shinsou to sleep.”

Eraser hears everything Izuku doesn’t say. He sighs and purses his mouth, leaning his head back against the wall and staring into the distance. Izuku curls his knees up and rests his cheek against them, trying not to drift off while he waits for Eraser to say whatever he’s thinking.

“Why this sudden change?” Eraser finally asks after what feels like ages and is probably only a handful of seconds. Izuku hums inquisitively, a request for elaboration. “Just a few days ago I was still working on getting you to take advantage of the quirks you already have and now you’re not only using those, you’re also using your base quirk, a possibility I have barely been able to get you to consider. Today you were joking with Shinsou about things that, last I knew, you were still borderline incapable of talking about.”

Shame curls like smoke around Izuku’s lungs. “Sh-should I not have?” he asks, picking at his fingers. “I th-thought–”

Eraser shrugs a hand of his blanket cocoon and drops it into Izuku’s hair, combing his fingers through the floppy bit that covers Izuku’s ear. “That’s not what I meant,” he assures. “You’ve done nothing wrong. I was – I was incredibly… happy to see you like that. I just don’t know how you *got* there, and that worries me. It seems abrupt. Forcing yourself to make progress will only backfire in the end. You don’t need to push yourself any harder than you already have been, and if you push yourself *too* hard–"

“I’m not,” Izuku interrupts. “I – I have been p-pushing myself, but not t-too much, I promise.”

“You were already working so hard,” Eraser murmurs. Izuku thinks he must also be very tired, to sound so melancholic.

“Hard on some things,” Izuku corrects. “There’s a lot of stuff I was just avoiding.”

“You don’t need to tackle it all at once.”

“I know. But–” Izuku huffs, burying his face in Eraser’s shoulder and

speaking into the blanket. Eraser grunts but allows it. Izuku has already said so much tonight. He is tired enough that speaking seems like a chore, but simultaneously, his tongue is lax and the words come easily. “Shinsou and Todoroki are trying so hard. They both – all three of us, we all have p-problems with our quirks. Everyone always told Shinsou that his quirk was v-villainous, but he never stopped trying to use it to be a hero. Todoroki is afraid that using his fire will make him like his f-father, but now he’s trying to learn to control it for his own sake.

“During the sports festival, I told Todoroki that instead of refusing to use his fire, he should use it to do *g-good* things. That was p-pretty hypocritical of me, I think. The most villainous part of my q-quirk, the part that reminds me of my d-d-d… f-father – I’ve just been p-pretending it doesn’t exist, and that doesn’t do anyone any g-good.”

“That’s… very mature,” Eraser finally says. “I’m proud of you.”

Izuku hiccups, caught off guard by the sudden reappearance of his own tears. He presses his face harder against Eraser’s shoulder, and Eraser wrestles one of his arms free from his blanket cocoon to pat Izuku’s back. It’s a stilted gesture that makes something agitated deep inside Izuku finally settle and calm.

“You know w-what?” Izuku asks, wet but bright. “I’m p-proud of me, t-too.”

Laughing and crying feel the same to Izuku right now. That’s okay. For once, they both feel *good,* in their own ways. Rain and sunshine can coexist, after all. The sky is at its most beautiful when they do.

I won’t hurt forever, will it?

The horrible thing about pain is you never really get used to it. Either it goes away, or you suffer and you suffer and you suffer. Love is like that, in Shigaraki Tomura’s experience. It’s a hole in your heart. You suffer and you suffer and you suffer until it goes away and then you wonder why you ever even bothered suffering for it in the first place.

It’s so much easier to be alone, isn’t it?

Most pain is caused by other people, which makes it very easy to cut it off at the source. Sometimes you can be the cause of your own pain, but there's nothing to be done about that. You never should have made an enemy of yourself to begin with, because now you hurt, and there is no love to blame for it, and you are all alone.

See, the issue is –

When left on their own, things tend to go from bad to worse.

The same can be said for most people.

Chapter End Notes

> Rumor has it that Todoroki's last three flags still haven't been found, to this very day.
>
> Nedzu, chanting: Fight, fight, fight!
> Aizawa: What the fuck is wrong with you??
>
> Izuku: You're easy to talk to
> Hitoshi: Literally everyone would disagree, but okay
>
> Hitoshi: Midoriya and I are not friends.
> Hitoshi: *has a big gay crush*
> Hitoshi: We are friends! Just friends!!!
>
> Izuku made a lot more progress in this chapter than I had planned, but that's okay. He's going to need all the mental stability he can get :))
>
> Next chapter: Bloodcurdle – Part IV

Works inspired by this one

Silent Comfort by chronicMisfortune

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